

***THE IDEA OF INTERDISCIPLINARITY IN
WOLFHART PANNENBERG'S ANTHROPOLOGY***

Mihai Androne, Assoc. Prof., Ph.D., “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați

Abstract: Wolfhart Pannenberg is the name of a great contemporary Western thinker, only recently deceased, with a significant contribution to the development of Christian anthropology. He analysed the human condition in the spirit of interdisciplinarity, his vast and profound work joining together the newest information in theology, philosophy, history and science. Modern by embracing the multiple fields of knowledge, Wolfhart Pannenberg was a critic of modernity taken as an epoch when the faith in God was abandoned.

Keywords: God, Wolfhart Pannenberg, anthropology, theology, interdisciplinarity

Motto: “Because God is the creator of everything and will be the redeemer of everything, theology has to be concerned with everything. This doesn’t make theology interdisciplinary in a superficial sense. It is interdisciplinary because theology is concerned with only one thing, and that is God.”^{kk}

Wolfhart Pannenberg

The interdisciplinary spirit of theological anthropology in general and Wolfhart Pannenberg’s anthropology in particular actually reflect their aspiration towards being “scientific”: scientific discourse, including the one on man, is at present rational and interdisciplinary par excellence^{ll}. Interdisciplinarity involves a research deontology within which the assertion of *specificity* is closely linked to the honest acknowledgement of its own *limitations*; hence, the need for *dialogue*, *cooperation* among the researchers from various knowledge domains^{mmm}.

If man is an infinitely complex being, then all the subjects studying him are complementary. Complementarity means relation, connection, eliminating from the very start both the major danger of arrogant isolation within his own limits, the limitations of fragmentation, and the danger of amalgamation often leading to confusion. Although the theologian and the man of science research the human being using their own means and methods, in the 21st century however no researcher affords ignoring the discoveries of adjacent knowledge domains. The theologian and the philosopher cannot possibly abandon the unifying *metaphysical* discourse of a higher order, but at the same time they cannot even afford to operate only with *abstract* items, inaccessible to natural sciences.

Theology may provide a *global* and *systematic* image of man and his condition in the world, and may bring into the limelight *fundamental* truths, to the extent in which it knows

^{kk} <http://www.faith-theology.com/2005/10/interview-with-wolfhart-pannenberg.html>

^{ll} “Un discours scientifique sur l’homme doit être aujourd’hui nécessairement interdisciplinaire. Ni les sciences dites de l’homme ni les sciences de la nature ne peuvent se limiter à leur propre méthodologie si elles veulent approcher la vérité de l’être humain de façon pertinente. [...] En raison de ses dimensions multiples et de sa grande complexité la réalité humaine ne peut être adéquatement connue que si l’on joue pleinement le jeu d’une pluralité convergente de méthodes.” (Ganoczy, 2008:9). See also Hartung and Herrgen, 2014:9.

^{mmm} Ganoczy, 2008:9. Cf. Wentzel van Huyssteen, 2001:65ff. Wolfhart Pannenberg makes an interesting observation in one of his works, showing that there is no *interdisciplinarity* (science) without *modesty* (ethics): “In all the sciences, humility is required.” (Pannenberg, 2008:8)

and it is available to giving up its long-lasting and exclusive partnership with philosophy, and resorting to the instruments of analysis in biology, psychology, sociology and cultural anthropology, without giving up, needless to say, its own Biblical heritage, i.e. its own identity, although any theological approach in the name of interdisciplinarity presupposes a certain detachment from the traditional, classic discourse of theology. “In contrast to traditional dogmatic anthropology, the studies undertaken here may be summarily described as a *fundamental-theological* anthropology. This anthropology does not argue from dogmatic data and presuppositions. Rather, it turns its attention directly to the phenomena of human existence as investigated in human biology, psychology, cultural anthropology, or sociology and examines the findings of these disciplines with an eye to implications that may be relevant to religion and theology.”^{mn} Interdisciplinarity is a *challenge*, or the German theologian and anthropologist in question sometimes left the impression that, being driven by the postmodern passion of interdisciplinarity, he strained to a certain extent from the classical benchmarks of Christianity, and the Word of God, totally oblivious that one of the basic principles of Protestantism is *sola Scriptura*.

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By its very nature theology is interdisciplinary and pluridisciplinary, viz. varied: it is *liturgical, practical, biblical, historical, political, dogmatic (systematic)*. Sometimes one tends to believe that subjecting it to the exigency of a close cooperation with the human and natural sciences eventually means subjecting it to the exigency of a super-interdisciplinarity vested in *encyclopaedism*: or “life is too short for a biblical specialist to do more than read selectively and dabble here and there.”^{oo} In its turn, *anthropology* is synonymous with *interdisciplinarity* and *pluralism*: anthropology is *cognitive, biological, cultural, applied, global, linguistic, medical, moral, political, psychological, philosophical*, and of course, *theological*. And the enumeration may go on.

It is regretful to find that the Christian theologian and anthropologist in the 21st century are often tempted, in order to increase their influence in society, to address only the human mind and totally neglect the role of faith, for the good reason that today’s people, in their overwhelming majority, *place all their trust in science*^{pp}. Anyway, even in this case it would not be advisable to forget that man is a rational being, as well as one who *knows* that *he is ignorant*, and it is ever more often that the Western academic world talks about the limits of rationality.

Focusing on the works of Wolfhart Pannenberg, an important Christian theologian and anthropologist, recently deceased, the aim of our research is to investigate the extent to which he was an adept of interdisciplinarity.

Pannenberg claims that, as early as the moment when theology started being studied in universities in the Middle Ages, it was seen as *divine wisdom* and *science* at the same time. When the Christian theologians claimed that God is the creator of the entire universe, they

^{mn}Pannenberg, 1985:21. “Est-il réellement possible à un théologien chrétien de se situer dans un champ de recherche interdisciplinaire avec les sciences humaines *etsi Deus non daretur* [...]? Ces interrogatifs mettent en évidence les difficultés dans lesquelles la théologie se débat aujourd’hui – la théologie protestante en particulier – dans sa confrontation avec la question anthropologique.” (Genre, 1997:66)

^{oo}Childs, 1992:xvi.

^{pp}Wentzel van Huyssteen, 2006:129.

implicitly accepted to interact with those whose subject of study was nature: in this context the theologians tried to show that the Christian teaching is in harmony with the unfolding of natural phenomena and human life. “The truth-claim of the Christian teaching about the one true God, the creator of the universe, then, implies the acceptance of coherence as criterion of truth. [...] How can the claim to coherence with all sorts of human experience of the world ever be tested or confirmed? My answer is that this can be done in the form of the systematic presentation of the Christian doctrine of God, of creation, and of human history in terms of a history of salvation. Such a systematic presentation must be not only consistent within itself and consonant with the biblical witness but also coherent with regard to all matters that have to be taken into account in such a presentation. Each aspect must be reinterpreted when considered in its relation to God because the secular treatment of nature at large and of human nature abstracts from the relationship to God the creator.”⁹⁹

Thus, any activity taking place in the spirit of interdisciplinarity is one of data *reinterpretation*. In the case of Christian theology reinterpretation is a *systematic* one, according to Wolfhart Pannenberg in the same paper quoted above¹⁰⁰, also adding that this hermeneutical activity does not aim at *proving* the truth of the Christian faith. In fact, through these assertions the German theologian and anthropologist only shows the importance of systematic theology, the subject aiming at casting an all-encompassing view on an all-encompassing reality: God, the creator of the universe. To Pannenberg, truth means Totality¹⁰¹.

Wolfhart Pannenberg, in his work *Toward a Theology of Nature*¹⁰², notes that scientists are interested in having a dialogue with the theologians not because they would need help in explaining nature, but to be able to anticipate the implications and consequences of certain scientific discoveries. Science cannot be separated from conscience, as, if a play-upon-words is allowed, science use, in the absence of conscience, definitely results in abuse, which may prove fatal to humanity.

But theology is not a strong partner of science in this respect, as it came out weakened from the long “war” against science. The present cooperation between theology and science starts from the assumption that religious assertions should not be completely foreign to scientificity, just like authentic ethics, the one serving human life and dignity, cannot be optional to the scientist. And a secular ethics is a logical impossibility, as it becomes just a mere social convention, according to the lesson taught by one of the greatest atheist philosophers of the 20th century, Jean-Paul Sartre: “If God does not exist, everything is permissible.”¹⁰³

However, from a Christian point of view, theology is not necessary solely as a moral *appendix* to science. And Wolfhart Pannenberg makes, in his book *Toward a Theology of Nature*, a series of clarifications meant to shed light on the relevance of Christian theology in

⁹⁹Pannenberg, 2008:7.

¹⁰⁰ “The theological reinterpretation must be argued reasonably and plausibly and provide a systematic reinterpretation of all that is claimed to be God’s creation. The systematic form of presentation corresponds to the requirement of coherence as a criterion of truth [...]. In attempting such a systematic presentation Christian theology offers its examination of the truth-claim involved in the affirmation, that the trinitarian God is indeed the creator and redeemer of the world and of all humankind.” (Pannenberg, 2008:7-8)

¹⁰¹Pannenberg, 2004 (1):140; O’Donnell, 1991:76.

¹⁰²Pannenberg, 1993:15ff.

¹⁰³ Sartre, 2007:28-29.

our world. If God is the creator of the world, nature, then nature can only be adequately understood to the extent in which we relate to God. Or Christian thinking denies, starting from the premise above, that nature may be deeply understood in the absence of God: if God does not exist in his quality of creator and ruler of nature, then ethics (in the strong sense of the word) does not exist either, and theology cannot offer anything to science in this case, being of absolutely no assistance. It cannot offer any help on an ethical level.

Therefore, resuming a previous idea, if truth means Totality, then it may be grasped from various perspectives. The human being has a particular and unique place in the cosmos, being characterised by a double *openness*: to the *world* and to *God*. *Openness* means freedom and adaptability, search, interrogation, choice and decision, creative dynamism, imagination, eyes fixed on the future, destiny, overcoming egocentricity, instinct, heredity, sensoriality, openness means relation and dialogue, as outside this dialogue man cannot adequately comprehend himself. That is why in the Christian vision anthropology is founded on theology: any question referring to *what is man* sends par excellence to his relation to God. Man is *openness to the world* just because, unlike animals, he is not the world's prisoner, but instead manages to go beyond his environment, says Wolfhart Pannenberg. In other words, we shall never be able to determine precisely the place of man within the universe unless we take the divine into account. If animals are dependent on their environment, then man is dependent on God^{vv}: God is man's environment, and this truth entirely explains why man is open to the world.

Aren't we entitled to view this *openness* as ontological foundation of an interdisciplinarity seen in a larger perspective, as long as the German theologian and anthropologist claims that man, being open to the world, is not dependent on the world he lives in, but instead is perpetually apt to have new life experiences, i.e. have varied responses to the demands of the environment? The following assertion belonging to Wolfhart Pannenberg is relevant and in this case does not require any additional comment: the look that man casts on reality is open par excellence^{ww}.

Anyway, Wolfhart Pannenberg opines that any question referring to the nature of man is in fact one referring to his destiny^{xx}. The issue of anthropogenesis has fallen in a slight abeyance under the influence of the philosophical products of (post)modernism (Marxism, humanism, nihilism, existentialism), while, at the same time, the breakthroughs of medicine and genetics fuel vivid bioethical controversies: is there moral justification for human cloning, does genetic engineering really support life and observe our dignity?

Or the answer to these questions is largely conditioned by the manner in which we choose to answer the capital question on the origin, thus the nature of man. If man conceives

^{vv}Pannenberg, 1976:13. Max Scheler's words are very suitable in this context: "A spiritual being is no longer bound by instinct and the environment, but `environment-free and, as we would like to call it, 'open to the world'." (Scheler, 1947:36) Max Scheler showed this final aspect before Wolfhart Pannenberg, pointing to the fact that Humankind is *openness* par excellence (MingWong, 2008:59ff.).

^{ww}Pannenberg, 1976:5ff. In regard to this notion, i.e. *openness*, see the articles by Hans-Peter Grosshans, "Paul's Anthropology and Its Contribution to the Formation of Humanity in the Perspective of Reformation Theology" (in Berthelot and Morgenstern, 2011:90ff.) and Jaqueline A. Stewart, "Some Problems with the Theological Appropriation of Biology by W. Pannenberg" (in Gregersen, 1998:121), Grenz, 2000:130ff., Moody, 1981:268, Molnar, 2007:304f.

^{xx}Pannenberg, 1978:5.

of himself as one of God's creatures or a more evolved animal, he will feel different calls in his soul, thus judging things and acting, in both cases, in different manners^{yy}. Anthropology has a definite ethical dimension, or theological anthropology claims that only as a divine creation does man dispose of an entirely special value, and his life is truly sacred and should be preserved at any cost.

Or it is at this point that the incongruity between Christian classicism and secular modernity becomes apparent. As early as the beginning of his book *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, Wolfhart Pannenberg displays realism when claiming that modern Anthropology parted ways with the Christian tradition and no longer defines the uniqueness of man in relation to God, but explains it by the peculiar place humans occupy in nature. In modern anthropology man is special not because he is the image of God, but because he is different from other animals, and he has, truth be told, a different behaviour.

In his book *What is Man?* Wolfhart Pannenberg writes that "we live in an age of anthropology"^{zz}. Man wishes to reach an all-encompassing self-understanding, and philosophers, biologists, medicine experts, jurists, sociologists, psychologists and theologians seem to be in agreement on this common point (of an interdisciplinary character) and leave the impression that they managed to find how they can speak the same language. But this "agreement" is by no means devoid of asperities, and critical or contesting stances: Wolfhart Pannenberg considers that neither the biologists, nor the specialists in cultural or legal anthropology, nor the sociologists managed by their specific approaches to comprehend the factual man, to reach him, but only provided abstract images about him. The various anthropological disciplines indulge in partial, fragmented, unilateral approaches.

Man, as an individual, is a living being disposing of a certain natural, biological endowment, a certain anatomical structure. But man is not just a biological being and nothing more, he is also an individual, in need of communion relations with his neighbors in order to develop fully. It could be said, in the spirit of Wolfhart Pannenberg's thinking, that man is a social, civic, political being, he is a *zoon politikon*, and this *politikon* is not a mere complement or insignificant detail of *zoon*, but instead it goes beyond it, transcending to another plan of existence, a clearer and more actual one.

However, it would be erroneous to think that we could stop at the social frame of human existence: human society evolved in time, it is a reality constantly marked by dynamism. So, the historical perspective on the human being comes to complete the sociological one. Although the historical perspective somehow comprises the other anthropological research and it is more capable of grasping the fulfilment of human life, yet the look that history casts over man also remains *abstract*, as it fails to reflect the endless number of situations and events in the life of a human.

But, despite this drawback, history represents for Wolfhart Pannenberg "the crown of all anthropological sciences"^{aaa}. How should we explain, in a nutshell, the preference that Wolfhart Pannenberg shows for history? The German anthropologist claims that man himself is by his very nature a historical being, *geschichtlich*, and he agrees to the anthropological

^{yy}Gehlen, 1983:35.

^{zz}Pannenberg, 1976:5. See also, for the following, 95f.

^{aaa}Pannenberg, 1976:96.

view of existentialism which opines that the life of any individual is a sequence of circumstances, decisions and of course acts resulting from those decisions. But, unlike the doctrine of the atheistic existentialism which assigns no place to divine providence, Wolfhart Pannenberg firmly states that the life of man here on earth is not exclusively determined by his personal inclinations, but guided by God.

The privileged place assigned to history by Wolfhart Pannenberg may also be explained from another point of view, closely linked to the one above: history means revelation, the acts of God are historical and revelatory, and they are so in reality and not metaphorically^{bbb}. Outside this framework for discussion Christian theology becomes a mere fictional construct, just like theological anthropology. The historical man Wolfhart Pannenberg is talking about is the factual, living man, located *here* and *now*^{ccc}: he is a *here* and *now* accessible to theology and philosophy alike, as well as to various sciences.

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^{bbb}See Pannenberg, 1982; Erickson, 1985:186, 331.

^{ccc} Manfred S. Frings, in his study "Max Scheler: Drang und Geist", claimed that the focus of the German philosopher's thinking is the factual, living man, the man of *here* and *now*, in his psycho-somatic unity (*leiblich-geistigen Einheit*) and in the *world's openness* (*Weltoffenheit*) (Speck, 1991:15). We consider that this opinion may also characterise Wolfhart Pannenberg's reasoning.

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