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Relevance and Originality of the Theology of History. Wolfhart Pannenberg's Case

1. A speculative idea of history and Karl Löwith's challenge. An old problem

History has always been a subject of utmost importance in the philosophical tradition. One of its many declinations, that of the *philosophy of history*, currently (and for quite some time) lies in much worse shape. It is often regarded[1] as a past and overpassed way to find a sense in history, one that is not philosophically – nor in a broader sense theoretically – defensible. It would be nothing but an aprioristic construction that forces the factual events into a general and teleological movement that claims to connect the past with the future. There might be good reasons for such an attempt (mostly practical and political[2]); yet, we do not find ourselves in any Archimedean point where the totality of history can be observed and judged. We are very much in the middle of it, and no clear view is ever available; any assessment that thinks the opposite is delusional.

Karl Löwith offers a particularly famous example of this critical position in many of his writings, especially in *Meaning in History* (1949). As it is a very renowned thesis, it suffices here to recall its main points. According to Löwith, the ancient Greeks had a circular vision of history that foreshadowed an eternal recurrence of all things; on its own, history was not an independent sector. This approach ended with the arrival of Christianity, where a linear and progressive perspective – directed at the establishment of God's kingdom – was imposed. A second reversal takes place later (and gradually) with the affirmation of the modern philosophy of history over the original Christian theology of history. More than a

[1] Think of the eloquent critique of K. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, Routledge, London 2002.

[2] See A.U. Sommer, *Sinnstiftung durch Geschichte? Zur Entstehung spekulativ-universalistischer Geschichtsphilosophie zwischen Bayle und Kant*, Schwabe, Basel-Berlin 2006; D. Carr, *Experience and History. Phenomenological Perspectives on the Historical World*, Oxford University Press, London 2014, especially pp. 78-80.

substitution, what happens here is a falsification: for as independent and self-affirming as it pretends to be, Western philosophy of history is nothing but a secularised version of the Christian view. The element of faith is still very much present and influential; it is merely expressed in different ways. In other words, God is no longer leading history to its fulfillment, but only because it is believed that history itself – that is, history led by men – is well capable of doing that alone. This belief is nothing but an illusion: in the author's drastic words, "historical processes as such do not bear the least evidence of a comprehensive and ultimate meaning"[3]. The outcome is, therefore, a nihilistic one: unsupported by any form of *Grund*, the philosophy of history dissolves into pure historicism, incapable of providing any sense to actions and decisions. This contributes to very factual catastrophes, as testified in Löwith's time by two world wars and the Holocaust.

We do not intend here to assess whether this account is historically and theoretically reliable; the debate already has a long and prestigious tradition[4]. It might be of no minor interest to reflect, based on Löwith's framework, on the fundamental essence of the philosophy of history. His genealogy can be summarized as follows in terms of historical progression: first (with Christianity) we encounter a theology of history; then a succession of philosophies of history; and finally, historicism. And yet the situation is more complex than it appears. Just to mention one tension, according to Löwith a Christian theology of history is contradictory because Christianity itself is defined by its eschatological nature. Explicitly referencing Oscar Cullman's *Christ and Time* (1948), but mostly drawing from Franz Overbeck's account[5], Löwith insists that "Christians are not a historical people"[6]: they are solely focused on the moment when the divine Kingdom is established, which occurs with the disruption of history. History is nothing but a time of wait and hope; it has no value in itself. A genuine Christian perspective does not give rise to any theology of history[7].

[3] K. Löwith, *Meaning in History. The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 1949, p. 191.
[4] See the famous critique by H. Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, MIT Press, Cambridge 1985. Among the recent contributions, S. Griffioen, *Contesting Modernity in the German Secularization Debate. Karl Löwith, Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt in Polemical Context*, Brill, Leiden 2022 is especially insightful.
[5] See especially F. Overbeck, *Über die Christlichkeit unserer heutigen Theologie*, now in Id., *Werke und Nachlaß: Band 1. Schriften bis 1873*, a cura di M. Stauffacher-Schaub, R. Brandle, H. Cancik-Lindemaier, Metzler, Stuttgart 1994, pp. 155-256.
[6] K. Löwith, *Meaning in History*, cit., p. 195.
[7] On the other side, it is also true that Löwith finds the theology of history more honest than the philosophy of history, as at least it explicitly acknowledges its reliance on faith.

Without even considering this aporia, what counts here is that the theology of history should precede – both logically and chronologically – the development of a philosophy of history. This is because any philosophy of history is intrinsically (and perhaps unconsciously) more *theological* than philosophical. It is unlikely to envision the opposite scenario, where a theology of history emerges from a philosophical explanation, as the latter lacks self-sufficiency and would still require an external foundation. Nonetheless, after Löwith's apparently definitive critique, there have been several attempts to provide a theological framework to history, both from the Protestant and the Catholic perspective. Wolfhart Pannenberg's proposal stands out as one of the most insightful. It can be read as a response to the challenge formulated by Löwith, who was not by chance one of his teachers during his formative year. We, therefore, need to explore the implications of Pannenberg's take on the relationship between the philosophy and theology of history. More broadly, we ask: How can theology retain a philosophical relevance? What unique insights does it offer that cannot be articulated with equal or greater clarity by any philosophy of history? Can a dialogue between these disciplines continue as fruitfully as it has been for many centuries, or should we accept the fact that in a secular (or post-secular[8]) age this is no longer possible?

In light of these questions, we will proceed as follows. First, keeping Löwith's framework in mind, we will present and discuss Pannenberg's concept of revelation. We will highlight the essential role that history plays in this concept and argue that history is indeed the sole means through which revelation manifests itself. Consequently, God's revelation possesses a specific historical structure that can be expanded to encompass our understanding of history as a whole. Second, we will examine how this understanding impacts the study of history, both philosophically and historiographically, drawing from Pannenberg's direct contribution to this topic. We will demonstrate that the theology of history can effectively interact with the philosophy of history and a historicist perspective, addressing issues that might otherwise remain unresolved. Finally, we will argue that the philosophy of history and the theology of history are not inherently incompatible. Instead, they can work together to provide a more comprehensive understanding of our historical experience in the world. We aim to clarify a longstanding debate that, while perhaps not currently *à la mode*, has a rich tradition; by doing that, our goal is also to encourage a revaluation of the ongoing need to create representations of the history we live in.

[8] See M. Rectenwald, R. Almeida, G. Levine (a cura di), *Global Secularisms in a Post-Secular Age*, De Gruyter, Boston-Berlin 2015; P. Costa, *The Post-Secular City. The New Secularization Debate*, Brill, Paderborn 2022.

2. Pannenberg's idea of revelation. Just another theological view on history?

The problem of history is often described as the focal point of Pannenberg's work. Despite his countless theological interests and extensive writings on many topics, his starting point was a theological reflection on *Geschichte*; this issue is carried forward, rather than forgotten, in his later works. While we will also refer to them, the focus is here on his early contributions, particularly on the well-known *Offenbarung als Geschichte* (*Revelation as History*), first published in 1961. In this way, we will get a sense of how the revelation works according to Pannenberg, and why this has crucial implications beyond a purely theological understanding of history.

Offenbarung als Geschichte is a collective work, composed within the so-called *Heidelberg-Kreis*, which included theologians with different backgrounds and areas of specialization[9]. However, Pannenberg clearly plays the central role, as he not only authored the most important chapter, structured in eight dogmatic theses, but also provided the *Introduction*, outlining the aim of the entire project. In brief, the book argues that Christian revelation is not restricted to a single historical event that orients all of history thereafter (even though the case of Christ is admittedly decisive), but rather continuously unfolds as historical and within history itself. Revelation occurs *as* history; man experiences it as such. An original ontological view is therefore at stake.

This is evident since Pannenberg's first thesis, which reads: "the self-revelation of God in the biblical witnesses is not of a direct type in the sense of a theophany, but is indirect and brought about by means of the historical acts of God"[10]. The experience of God's revelation is marked by original characters, in comparison with more traditional accouns. Drawing on the exegetical findings of his colleagues, Pannenberg emphasizes that no word in the Bible explicitly articulates a self-revelation of God. God "reveals 'something' or someone', never precisely himself", and this is why it is more accurate to write about *manifestations*[11]. Sticking to the history of Israel, the focus is neither on a singular deed nor a series of

[9] The names of the other authors and chapters are Rolf Rendtorf (*The Concept of Revelation in Ancient Israel*); Ulrich Wilkens (*The Understanding of Revelation Within the History of Primitive Christianity*); and Trutz Rendtorff (*The Problem of Revelation in the Concept of the Church*). For an extended discussion on many of the themes of the book, see G. Wenz (a cura di), *Offenbarung als Geschichte: Implikationen und Konsequenzen eines theologischen Programms*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2018.
[10] W. Pannenberg, *Revelation as History*, MacMillan, New York 1968, p. 125.
[11] Ivi, pp. 9-15.

separate acts. Rather, Pannenberg points to a different structure, one characterized by *indirectness*. From the experience of the Israelites, we learn that revelation not only happens in history but essentially *as* history. We could perhaps state that it *unfolds*, as it equates with the experience of history to unfold itself. Does that mean that every historical act bears witness to God? Or does God engage in specific historical acts, which indirectly and collectively form his self-revelation? These questions are pertinent, yet they do not fully grasp the central aspect of revelation. Since it is indirect, revelation appears only *within and as* a structure of totality in which all elements are interconnected; it cannot be individuated. Every individual element somehow points to this totality but cannot fully encapsulate it on its own. Expanding on Pannenberg's argument, we might say that history as a concluded totality would constitute the direct revelation of God; however, since we experience it in glimpses and fragments, we only get an oblique sense of it.

These crucial points can be fully understood only in conjunction with the affirmation of the second thesis: "Revelation is not comprehended completely in the beginning but at the end of the revealing history"[12]. Beginning and end are the terms that denote the character of indirectness. They both are decisive but only when linked together. If revelation were to occur directly at the beginning of any event, no definitive end would be needed; conversely, if only the end could reveal the presence of God, then every historical happening would be nothing but a meaningless wait. The inadequacy of each event, when isolated from the whole, lies therefore in a specific reason: something is indeed revealed at an initial point, but its full understanding only comes at the end. Vice versa, what happens at the end sheds light on something that already happened – or, better, unfolded – before; the ending does not introduce something entirely new but recapitulates past events, displaying their sense. And yet it is no less radical feature: the sense that it unveils is not something that was already there, a priori, only waiting to be discovered. *The sense is generated by the final fulfillment*. As noted[13] what here occurs is a form of retroactivity that avoids any risk of determinism: *God creates from the future*. What we see here is a proleptic formation, one that will prove to be central in Pannenberg's overall theoretical proposal.

[12] Ivi, p. 131.
[13] C. Moostert, *God and the Future: Wolfhart Pannenberg's Eschatological Doctrine of God*, T&T Clark, London 2002; see also T.S. Labute, *The Ontological Motif of Anticipation in the Theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg*, in "Journal of the Evangelical Society", n. 37 (2), 1994 pp. 275-282.

Let us delve into this structure in more detail. The idea that the definitive revelation happens at the end "means that the biblical God has, so to speak, his own history"[14]. However, how can something be already revealed at the beginning – and where exactly does this beginning lie? We believe that here two senses of this expression can be found, or at least argued expanding from Pannenberg's thesis. On the first level, the beginning is not so much a specific point in the timeline of history but rather a fundamental feature of history itself: history is an ongoing beginning of new deeds and events (as Hannah Arendt, for instance, has eloquently shown with her notion of *acting*[15]).

Nevertheless, there is much more to be noted: Pannenberg's framework is undeniably theological, and it is essential to incorporate the arrival of Christ within it. The fourth thesis underlines that "in fate of Jesus, the end of history is experienced in advance as an anticipation"[16]. The event of Christ marks a new beginning for history – a beginning that looks for its end[17]. It is no coincidence that several sections of Pannenberg's important Christology (*Gründzuge der Christologie*) are also devoted to this aspect. Published in 1964, the work can be read as an eloquent case – this most important case – of the proleptic structure in history. Jesus preached from an apocalyptic perspective, which intensified the tension between the future and the present moment. However, due to the limitations of human experience, his actions could attest to his vocation only in a partial way, and they "remained aimed at the future verification of his claim to authority"[18]. A *chronological difference* is here at play, and it is a decisive one: the issue remains unresolved because of the temporal gap between the earthly inception of God's kingdom and its ultimate realization. Even in the case of the Son of God, no purely historical deed can present a fully accomplished structure.

In Pannenberg's view, the structure of history is, therefore, composed of multiple elements. Beginning, end, unfolding in between: these main points make for an architecture that has a form, but one that is uncertain and subjected to changes before the final revelation. The dynamics that

[14] W. Pannenberg, *Revelation as History*, cit., p. 133.
[15] H. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1998, pp. 175-247.
[16] W. Pannenberg, *Revelation as History*, cit., p. 134.
[17] Perhaps it could be argued, stretching Pannenberg's position, that *it constitutes a chance for history to experience the experience of the beginning*.
[18] W. Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man*, SCM Press, London 2002, pp. 53-54. Unlike theologians such as Bultmann, who insisted on the importance of Jesus in the present (as he manifests himself in each one's personal faith and Christian life), Pannenberg believes that any Christology that does not pay enough attention to the historical Jesus and his motivations is incomplete. In other words, we need to start from a historically determinate situation, that of Jesus as a Jewish Man, if we want to examine his divinity.

coordinate them (and that can be easily traced to other Pannenberg's books[19]) is one of anticipation and eschatology: an "already there" that is always lied to a "not yet"[20]. But it is still not clear how and if this can be also theoretically argued, and in what terms and limits. Or is it just a matter of faith, as *Glauben* and *Wissen* are completely separate even in the domain of history, as Löwith would argue[21], and faith finds a foundation only within itself? Pannenberg does not follow this route and argues for a strong link between theological and, specifically, historiographical matters. For that reason, the structure of the revelation reveals much about the historical world we live in – even from a non-religious standpoint.

3. Theological insights for the study of history

We now have a more solid foundation for a full understanding of what is at stake in the early essays that focus on the problem of history and may not necessarily evoke the problem of revelation. Their decisive output is that theology and the theory of history are inherently linked and can only be separated at the expense of an inadequate understanding of both. One of the most crucial texts, *Redemptive Event and History* (*Heilsgeschehen und Geschichte*), from 1959, begins by stating that "history is the most

[19] The proleptic structure extends beyond exclusively fideistic use and is directly integrated into philosophical and anthropological domains. In his later *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* T&T Clark, London 1985 (originally published in 1983) Pannenberg describes man's constitution as proleptic, in multiple senses. First, there exists a tension between the singular moments of one's life and the concept of the Self as a whole. The latter is manifested in the formers, which are still partial but already points to a definitive totality; an element of indeterminacy awaits future determination. The overall trajectory is thus shrouded in mystery, leaving the individual life open. Secondly, Pannenberg evokes a thesis from Herder to argue that there is an anticipation of universality in every single perception, and this is what enables the sensing of actual objects. This suggests that every human relation with finite elements entails an intrinsic connection to the infinite, intertwining the seemingly anthropological question of what constitutes man with the question of God. Finally, the same dynamic applies to the structure of language. Every dialogue unfolds within a totality as horizon; with each expression, the listener anticipates the entire proposition and its link with the rest of the discourse (and so does the speaker). The communion established between the partners thus hinges on a continuous dynamic of anticipation that refers to a totality.

[20] A very similar structure was already individuated by Oscar Cullmann (see his *Christ and Time: the primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1950 and *Salvation in History*, SCM Press, London 1970) and in the same years by J. Moltmann (*Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, SCM, London 1967) – but not, in our opinion, at the same intensity of theoretical rigour.

[21] See the essays collected in K. Löwith, *Wissen, Glaube und Skepsis. Sämtliche Schriften,* Band 3, Metzler, Stuttgart 1985.

comprehensive horizon of Christian theology"[22]. Another, *The Crisis of the Scripture Principle* (*Die Krise des Schriftprinzips*, 1962) affirms that "the understanding of the world as history is that conception of reality which the biblical understanding of God has disclosed to mankind"[23].

Pannenberg was very aware of the longstanding debate within theological circles on these themes. Here he explicitly names Rudolf Bultmann and Friedrich Gogarten on one side, and Karl Barth and Martin Kähler on the other, as polemical points of reference. In his view, the former group placed excessive emphasis on the historicity of existence, while the latter group overstated a supposed supra-historical kernel of faith[24]. In both cases, history as such is dissolved. Conversely, rigorous studies of the Old Testament reveal something different: that with the Israelite people, "history arises"[25]. This has significant implications to unpack, as what is proposed can ultimately lead to an "interpretation of the world as history". Israel not only conceived history as a specific dimension of reality but also encompassed the entire creation within history, *as* history[26]. What we have here, according to Pannenberg, is the origin of what would eventually evolve into historical consciousness and modern historical thought.

If one takes these premises seriously, it becomes immediately relevant to consider how a theology of history can contribute to any kind of historiographical study. This also entails clarifying what a theology of history is no longer intended to be or accomplish. Its purpose is no longer to *identify* each specific divine action within the historical (and mundane) unfolding of reality because the historicity of the world as such already attests (indirectly) to the manifestation of God. Instead, it is by way of assuming a religious and Christian perspective that the world is discovered (and therefore investigated) as historical, on a fundamental level. Moreover, here Pannenberg explicitly diverges from Heidegger, or at least of the Heidegger of *Sein und Zeit* who affirms – in Chapter Five from the second section, called *Temporality and Historicity* – that *Dasein* has a history (*Geschichte*) because it is intrinsically historical (*geschichtlich*)[27]. In contrast, the young theologian asks himself rhetorically "whether histo-

[22] W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology. Collected Essay*, vol. I, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1970, p. 15.
[23] Ivi, p. 14.
[24] Ivi, pp. 15-16.
[25] Here Pannenberg first names Mircea Eliade (*The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Pantheon Books, New York 1954), and many other scholars, but is especially influenced by Gerhard von Rad (see his *Old Testament Theology*, Harper & Raw, New York 1962).
[26] Ivi, p. 21.
[27] M. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, SUNY, Albany 1996, p. 345.

ricity rather is not grounded in the experience of reality as history, just as it is made accessible in the history of the promise of God with Israel"[28].

The brief assessment may or may not fully capture Heidegger's point, but it mostly suggests a possibly nihilistic result. In this sense, Pannenberg's take seems both similar and distinct from Löwith's interpretation. Interestingly, the Heideggerian (and dominant) viewpoint does not contribute to preserving any true sense of historicity; it rather falls prey to a misunderstanding. Conversely, the profound historicity rooted in Jewish and Christian traditions becomes increasingly threatened in today's world due to the modern view of historicism, because the continuity of history and the historicity of man are seen as conflicting forces. This trajectory ultimately "leads to the loss of the experience of history as well as that of historicity"[29]: as any possible image of world history fades, so does the historicity of human existence. Contrary to the claims of historicism, our individual biography is intertwined with, rather than reversed by, history as a whole.

The underlined points are of paramount importance. Firstly, history fundamentally grounds our existential historicity, rather than the converse. We are historical beings precisely because we are situated – or *geworfen*, in Heideggerian terms – within the expansive context of world history. The evolution of world history shapes our historicity and defines our existence; it is not an outdated or obsolete concept, as suggested by Löwith's critique, but rather an essential element of our identity. While it may appear to be an external structure, it fundamentally aligns with our anthropological character and plays a critical role in shaping it. Consequently, the issue lies not in the concept of world history itself, but in how it is represented. An account of human historicity that neglects this aspect is as deficient as one that inadequately characterizes world history, as was the case with the traditional philosophies of history (at least if we operate within Löwith's framework).

There is more to say, as soon as a couple of additional terms are added to the discussion. The problematic relationship between necessity and contingency is another delicate challenge for the philosophy of history. It could be argued that it is its fundamental problem; it is, after all, another way to phrase the same issue of individual historicity and world history. If Pannenberg could envision a solution to that problem, a similar clarification may be expected here. The author *does* highlight the inherent risk in global perspectives of history, where individual historical events may lose their contingent nature in favor of a predetermined and inevitable

[28] W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions*, cit., p. 35.
[29] *Ibidem*.

significance. Kierkegaard's protest *contra* Hegel serves as a relevant example in this context. Yet, Pannenberg does not fully align with the former, although he admits that a very important demand is expressed. He also underscores that the Christian faith inherently values the contingent nature of all worldly phenomena but sticks to the idea that a hint of totality is needed[30]. This prompts the question of how it is possible to maintain a global perspective of history without imposing a predetermined direction and meaning on its constituent elements. There is a seemingly unsolvable contradiction here.

The fascinating aspect is that the theology of history, or at least Pannenberg's version of it, might offer a more compelling approach than any traditional philosophy of history. While both provide an overarching viewpoint, theology allows for continual modification and remains open *by its very nature*. Here we must expand on the quality of "futureness" that underlies the entirety of Pannenberg's theology. The author does not provide any specific example, but he assumes that it influences the unfolding of any historical event. Where classical philosophy of history presupposes fulfillment and an a priori direction to be merely implemented, theology recognizes that in history nothing is settled and that every development remains subject to change, as God's action stems from the future. Pannenberg criticizes here Bultmann and Ernst Käsemann for their belief that Christ's arrival signifies the resolution of all historical issues. On the contrary, the presence of a hint of the end allows for a vision of the whole that must remain partial and incomplete, prompting further reflection and action[31]. In different terms, something is opened and acquires visibility, but in a specifically limited way – that of anticipation.

The question of meaning can further elucidate this point. We must recall Löwith's opinion, according to which "historical processes as such do not bear the least evidence of a comprehensive and ultimate meaning." However, Löwith also recognizes that a complete absence of meaning leads only to despair and nihilism – unless we can shift our mindset and undergo a transformation of our historical consciousness[32]. Thus, the goal is not to eliminate all meaning in history but to identify a suitable version of it. Pannenberg's work accomplishes just that: he argues that there is meaning in history, derived from its future (the advent of God's kingdom after the eschatological wait, in theological terms). This mean-

[30] Ivi, p. 73.
[31] Ivi, pp. 35-36.
[32] Löwith's final proposal advocates for reconnecting humanity with the natural world (presented in a cosmic and poetic manner), which is the only world and encompasses the much more restricted historical and social reality. See K. Löwith, *Mensch und Menschenwelt. Sämtliche Schriften*, Band 1, Metzler, Stuttgart 1981, especially pp. 259-341.

ing, which emerges from what has yet to come, remains fundamentally unknowable in the present and significantly impacts all current meanings. While they are not rendered entirely obsolete, we must remain cognizant of their inherent incompleteness. This approach helps to avoid two extremes: the nihilistic full rejection of meaning and the oppressive imposition of a singular, predetermined meaning. In essence, the dynamic is circular: the openness of the future reinvigorates our experience of the present, revealing its rich and virtual possibilities; conversely, the openness of the present provides us with an opportunity to reevaluate future outcomes and possibilities. Radicalizing Pannenberg's position, the openness operated by theology is more adequate to the matter in question; *the very structure that pertains to theology is more suitable than philosophy to achieve a theoretical understanding of history*.

This has very practical applications. Pannenberg displays a profound interest in historiography and historical knowledge, offering broad reflections on their potential and limitations. An important issue he addresses is anthropocentrism. While he acknowledges the inevitability and essential nature of a form of it (referred to as "methodological anthropocentrism") in historical research, he also warns against a less desirable outcome. It is for instance possible, but not advisable, to elucidate a series of historical events as direct progress, as "development in the strict sense, namely as the unfolding of germ-like tendency, an entelechy". Such unnecessary anthropocentrism reflects "an immanentist world view which will not do justice to the openness to the future on the part of everything real"[33].

Let us delve into Pannenberg's observation. Again, the structure of reality exhibits an inherent "openness to future"; the argument is familiar but approached from a different angle. Any historical perspective that fails to acknowledge this fundamental aspect is inherently flawed and cannot be endorsed, particularly if it presents itself as a philosophical standpoint. The conventional philosophy of history is lacking in this specific regard. Löwith's critique, in a sense, is not invalidated but rather reinforced: Pannenberg *specifies* the reasons why Western philosophies of history are no longer tenable. *Futurity* characterizes historical events and their interconnectedness: every situation is by definition open to multi-

[33] Ivi, p. 42. Here comes to mind the distinction between *Entwicklung* and *Fortschritt*, where the former has a much more modest claim compared to the latter. It is a differentiation that for instance Ernst Troeltsch, certainly a reference to Pannenberg and who is also cited here at p. 40 and 57, makes in *Der Historismus und seine Probleme*, WBG, Darmstadt 2016, pp. 57-59. Here Troeltsch distinguishes between the indefensible idea of *Fortschritt* (typical of the traditional philosophies of history), aligning very much with Löwith, and that of *Entwicklung*, which is intrinsic to historical process and does not provide any predeterminate and precise teleology, making it tenable.

ple outcomes and developments. Stretching, again, Pannenberg's position, every event unfolds potential futures precisely *because it is shaped by the future itself* (which is God's way of shaping history). An excessive immanentism fails to grasp this facet and consequently cannot ensure the appropriate degree of freedom inherent in any historical event. The intuition is based on a specific ontological perspective, which holds that reality is not limited to what currently exists, but also encompasses the possible that might occur in the future. In seemingly paradoxical terms, *the future does not exist but is undeniably real*, and therefore warrants serious consideration, just as much as any present reality[34].

The same observation can be transposed to hermeneutical and methodological concerns, suggesting that the full meaning of any event can only be understood within the context of an ever-open world history. That is why historical thought is unlikely to abandon the idea of a unified history[35]. Much more challenging is to determine how is it still possible to use God as the basis for this unity, provided that it is impossible to recognize an actual *telos* in human actions. On one hand, a conventional concept of divine Providence appears necessary, but on the other hand, it seems unacceptable.

Pannenberg's take is quite thought-provoking. He doesn't sever the connection between God and historical research, but instead reestablishes it unexpectedly. He writes that if we consider God as operating in the contingency of the events while also being the source of continuity within them, this does not contradict the historian's point of view as long as it is intended "only [as] a problem for the historian as he sets about his work"[36]. Instead, such a theological perspective presents a positive challenge to historiographical research, inspiring and motivating it to delve deeper into what theology can only hint at[37]. It is to be concluded that "such a theology of history distinguishes itself from the usual sort of redemptive-historical thinking by the fact that it wants to be in principle historically verifiable"[38]. Since the eschatological element of this account operates as an internal force within the process of history, it does not oppose the involvement of a historiographical inquiry. The affirmation

[34] An obvious reference is here Ernst Bloch and his meditation on the ontological consistency of the future, to which Pannenberg dedicated the article *The God of hope* (in W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology. Collected Essay*, vol. II, Fortress Press, Philadelphia 1972, pp. 234-249).
[35] W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions*, cit., pp. 68-70; Pannenberg explicitly refers to George R. Collingwood (see his *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1994).
[36] Ivi, p. 76.
[37] *Ibidem*.
[38] Ivi, p. 78.

of the "world as history" as a new perspective serves as a prime example of this: it can be interpreted as a fideistic claim – essentially, seeing it as a fundamental and first outcome of God's revelation – but this reading is by no means obligatory. The conceptualization of the world as history might simply represent a historical event among others. What emerges is a common foundational ground from which both historians and theologians can engage in further exploration.

But we might venture further than that, and perhaps beyond Pannenberg. It might be argued that, within this perspective, God reveals not only and not firstly the sense of history, or even its secret teleology. On the contrary, God manifests the *problematicity* of history. His intervention elevates the full contingency of events as individual occurrences, allowing them to be free and thus open to any outcome – often leading, in what is called a heterogony of ends, to despair and violent results. Only after recognizing this, it is possible to attribute to God a more traditional role of establishing a foundation. Problematicity here does not equate to a lack of sense, but rather to an intrinsically problematic sense: a sense that is manifested *within* the character of problematicity, and therefore appears only intermittently, between equally present (if not longer) moments of darkness that often obscures any glimpse of perspicuity. The problematicity of history is very much this *jeux de lumière* between understanding and incomprehension, clarity and darkness of thought; and a theology of history adeptly captures it. Consequently, the theology of history possesses a distinctive hermeneutical quality, as long as it retains the character of finitude inherent in human experience and its connection to his openness to the future and the value of the individual[39]. Based on this, perhaps it makes no sense to decide whether it is "better" than a philosophy of history. It seems that the two complement each other well – because together they address the same problem, that of universal history.

4. Philosophy and theology of history, together: *a new hope?*

What is the lesson to be learned from Pannenberg? How can we justify the relevance of the theology of history when we move to philosophical considerations? The intriguing paradox lies in Pannenberg's explicit pursuit of a theology of history (orthodoxically centered around

[39] W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions*, cit., pp. 135-136. The text now considered is *Hermeneutic and Universal History*, originally published as *Hermeneutik und Universalgeschichte* in 1963.

the event of Jesus[40]), while at the same time, the entire architecture betrays a speculative flavor. The proleptical framework bears witness to a deep engagement with Hegel, as already pointed out by scholars[41], reflected in the abundant use of terms such as totality, infinity, and process. There are many ways to interpret and make use of this affinity. We are prompted to revisit the old question of the relationship between theology and philosophy.

One instinctive reaction would be to consider integrating elements of Pannenberg's theology of history into a comprehensive philosophical framework to enhance the coherence of the latter. In this conception, a theology of history could retain its sense only in a subordinate position. A less common, and perhaps nowadays unlikely, procedure would be utilizing philosophical tools to develop a theology of history further. However, both positions would essentially reiterate old approaches that now seem outdated and naïve. They only partially tackle the highly complex issue of what is more foundational between Western speculative thinking and Western theology and do not consider the even more challenging question of which intellectual background we are currently operating within, that of metaphysics or a post-metaphysical one[42]. Any adequate analysis should first address these discussions.

For the scope of this contribution, the realm of history is broad enough. To better evaluate Pannenberg's contribution, it is helpful to reference once more Löwith's perspective. Although Pannenberg's approach has very different aims from his mentor's critique, both address the same fundamental issues and sometimes reach similar insights. We can learn from the differences as much as from the similarities. They both agree that history does not sustain itself and requires some validation. But Pannenberg's account also offers an immediate form of resolution, as it allows validation (one that comes from God). This validation is not entirely external but originates from history it-

[40] Although it is to be noted that the very notion of centre is modified by the accent on eschatology: it is the future of God that gives the Christological event the character of the centre – we could say that it is the future that *centres* history, providing an axis to it (see. W. Pannenberg, *Jesus*, cit., pp. 447-450).

[41] G. Pasquale, *La ragione della storia. Per una filosofia della storia come scienza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2011; T.J. Whapham, *Pannenberg the Idealist?*, in J. Farris, B. P. Göcke (a cura di), *The Routledge Handbook of Idealism and Immaterialism*, Routledge, London 2021, pp. 355-366.

[42] Pannenberg is not an advocate of the end of metaphysics and firmly admits the metaphysical roots of his thought – he explicitly states to act within the realm of it (see W. Pannenberg, *Metaphysics and the Idea of God*, W. B. Eerdmans, Michigan 1988, and then G. Wenz (a cura di), *Vom wahrhaft Unendlichen: Metaphysik und Theologie bei Wolfhart Pannenberg*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2016.

self and unfolds within it – that is why it is permitted. This ambivalence encapsulates the interest of Pannenberg's idea. His theology of history underscores both *the insufficiency of history and its simultaneous striving for sufficiency*. History lacks an inner *Grund* and remains incomplete but possesses an inner impetus towards its redemption. This interplay between anticipation and a "not yet" maintains history's openness and acknowledges the role of contingency, but on the other side does not equate to arbitrariness and nihilism. Each term limits the other's excessive claim.

Without setting this as a goal, Pannenberg is therefore reversing Löwith's structure: his theology of history not only comes after the *naive* philosophies of history from the Western tradition but also surpasses them – it avoids their mistakes and their contradictions. It does not claim to manifest a linear direction in history, but rather *conceptually emphasizes the problematicity of history itself*. That is a crucial point. For this reason, it is a theology that addresses the challenges posed by both the philosophy of history and historicism. Pannenberg's account still looks to provide a glimpse of an *image of history*, akin to any classical philosophy of history, but it does so with an awareness of its inherent limitations. This *Vorstellung* cannot be clear and definite, as it must maintain the space of human decision and action – something that is very much the preoccupation of any historicism[43]. Its axis[44] is a form of "openness" or a testimony to the fundamental openness of *Geschichte*: rather than offering a normative model to be implemented or imitated, it underscores the potential for history and human historicity to take multiple possible routes, along with the associated risks of loss and inauthenticity.

An original idea results from this scenario and modifies Löwith's genealogy. The philosophy of history – and historicism – could be seen as *tests* – and very effective – for any theoretical understanding of history, including a theological one. For a theology of history to

[43] Think of B. Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty,* Liberty Fund, Carmel 2000; for a less "optimistic" account see the already mentioned E. Troeltsch, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* cit., or F. Meinecke, *Historism. The Rise of a New Historical Outlook*, Herder & Herder, New York 1972 (the distinction between an absolute historicism and a critical-problematic one is drawn from Fulvio Tessitore – among his many works, see *Interpretazione dello storicismo*, Edizioni della Normale, Pisa 2006).

[44] Pannenberg makes an explicit reference to Karl Jaspers' theory of *Achsenzeit* (K. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, Taylor and Francis, London 2014), but in a critical way. According to the theologian (W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions*, cit., pp. 73-74), while the idea of an axis is justified, the actual one provided by Jaspers is insufficient to give an indirect sense to history because it misses two essential elements: the interior unity of one single element (the person of Jesus) and the eschatological attribute.

be revitalized, *it must undergo this experience and critique*. Only then does it become as, or even more, suitable than any philosophy of history or historicism in grasping the profound nature of historical existence. It becomes so because it captures both the element of presence, the "already" experienced in the present, and the sense of absence and incompleteness, the "not yet" awaiting a final fulfillment – both elements that, in their connection, characterize human anthropology. The philosophy of history risks neglecting the "not yet" that requires the image of history to be, in a sense, blurred; on the other hand, historicism might fail to recognize history's intrinsic tendency to coalesce into an image, without which it collapses into an unstructured flux of events devoid of meaning and partial teleology. From this standpoint, a theology of history would emerge as a synthesis of these two outputs and prove to be unexpectedly timely. It is clear that this assertion does not need to be overly ambitious, nor is it our intention here to establish a theological "superiority".

More modestly, Pannenberg's example shows that the affirmation of a revitalized form of theology could provide the ongoing dialogue between vastly different speculations with promising foundations. On a final note, the question of meaning arises once more and may offer valuable insight. We might pose a very simple question: who ascribes meaning to history – man or God? This inquiry highlights the essential distinction between the perspectives of theology and the philosophy of history. By setting aside the historical relationship between these two domains and examining their ideal-typed versions, we can assert that, according to a purely philosophical perspective, humanity forges its own path to self-fulfillment. In contrast, a theological view posits that history unfolds under divine guidance. We suggest that it is more productive to consider philosophy and theology of history simultaneously, rather than through a chronological lens, which might suggest that one is an illegitimate derivative of the other, leading to an obscure amalgamation. Instead, we maintain the crucial distinction between the two and observe that from their confrontation emerges a double agency, or perhaps more accurately, a dual layer of agency. Even if we follow Pannenberg in suggesting that meaning originates from God's future (first agency), it remains humanity's responsibility (second agency) to actively shape and implement that meaning. In hermeneutical terms, we receive God's message but ultimately must decide whether to heed and interpret it, granting us a significant degree of freedom. Thus, however apparently *démodé*, this dialogue remains of uttermost importance, and we can only conclude by wishing for its continuation and development in our turbulent times.

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