

A REFLECTION ON WOLFHART PANNENBERG'S CHANGE OF FOCUS IN CHRISTOLOGY¹

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I. Introduction

This paper is a reflection on the Christology of Wolfhart Pannenberg. As a Chinese Christian Theologian, I have published my doctoral dissertation on Pannenberg's Christology in 1997.² I would like to offer my critical appreciation of Pannenberg's Christology following ten years teaching experience in Hong Kong. In my opinion, the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology are the bases for interreligious dialogue between Christianity and Confucianism. I have written a paper on the topic of the Trinity and the idea of "Immanent

¹ This paper was presented in the Society for the Study of Theology 2007 Conference on 26-29 March, 2007 in Girton College, University of Cambridge.

² Benedict Hung-biu Kwok, *Von der historisch zur trinitätstheologisch begründeten Christologie Wolfhart Pannenberg's* (Hamburg: Verlag an der Lottbek, 1997).

Transcendence."³ In this conference, I will concentrate on the area of Christian doctrine and generally interpret Pannenberg's Christology critically. In the latter part of my paper, I will attempt to link up theology and doxology as a suggestion for developing Pannenberg's Christology.

II. The Integration of "Theology from Below" and "Theology from Above"

In comparison of *Gründzüge der Christologie*, 1964 and *Systematische Theologie Band 2*, 1991, Pannenberg shifted his theological focus in theological method. In *Gründzüge der Christologie*, he proposed a historical interpretation of Jesus of Nazareth without presupposing the divinity of Jesus. However, he accepted the necessity of the doctrine of Incarnation as the ground of theological construction in *Systematische Theologie Band 2*.⁴ We must recall that Pannenberg developed his doctrine of Trinity between 1964 and 1991. The focus of *Gründzüge der Christologie* was the partnership of theology and history; therefore the emphasis of Christology was the anthropological and historical approach to

³ Benedict Hung-biu Kwok, "The Christian Understanding of God as Transcendence and Immanence: A Response to Liu Shu-hsien's Understanding of the Pure Transcendence of God," *Ching Feng* 42: 1/2 (1999): 35-57.

⁴ Donald G. Bloesch is correct in the sense that Pannenberg doesn't give up his emphasis of the historical approach of Christology. See Donald G. Bloesch, "A Theology for the Twenty-First Century: Pannenberg attempts to reaffirm historical Christian faith," *Christianity Today*, 4 March 1995, 106. "In keeping with his earlier works, he affirms a Christology from below. That is to say, the point of departure in theology is not the pre-existent Logos incarnating himself in human flesh but the historical life, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christology finds its climax rather than its foundation in the doctrine of the Incarnation." However, what Pannenberg is trying to do in *Systematische Theologie Band 2*, is to connect Christology from below with Christology from above.

theology. After his construction of the doctrine of the Trinity, he had to clarify the relation of the ontological ground of the historical Jesus and the epistemological process. In *Systematische Theologie Band 2*, he reached the conclusion that Christology from below is the order of knowing and the Pre-existence of the Son of God is the ontological order.⁵ The elaboration of the history of christological construction is to show that the thought direction of Christology moves from below to above. He takes Paul Althaus as the example and agrees basically with Althaus' position but questions Althaus' arguments, from the point of faith.⁶ Pannenberg suggests that the grounds for the divinity of Jesus are the resurrection and also the pre-existence of the Son of God.⁷ He criticizes the existential interpretation of Christology for ignoring the factual dimension of history.⁸ After introducing the different forms of Christology from below, Pannenberg engages the criticism of Walter Kasper's opinion of Christology from below, that Spirit Christology should be strengthened. However, Pannenberg endeavours to show that even the Spirit itself is not a sufficient ground for the divinity of Jesus. After discussing his view that faith and spirit are not sufficient grounds for the divinity of Jesus,⁹ he moves on to the rehabilitation of Christology from above.

⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 2* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991), 315.

⁶ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 2*, 320.

⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 2*, 321. "Erst im Lichte seiner Auferstehung ist er auch der präexistente Gottessohn, und nur als Auferstandene bleibt er der lebendige Herr seiner Gemeinde."

⁸ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 2*, 323. "Die Frage nach der Zugehörigkeit der Auferstehung Jesu zum Glaubensgrund lässt sich nicht ablösen von der Frage nach der Tatsächlichkeit, also Historizität dieses Ereignisses."

⁹ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 2*, 326. "Dabei macht theologische Argumentation weder hier noch sonst den Glauben oder den Heiligen Geist überflüssig, aber umgekehrt muss auch gelten, dass die Berufung auf Glauben und Geist für sich noch kein Argument ist."

III. The Integration of "Revelation as History" and "Revelation as Word of God"

In comparing *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, 1961 and, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 1988, Pannenberg shifted his theological focus on Revelation. In *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, he argued for the public understanding of God's event from human reason in history. However, he affirmed Karl Barth's understanding of Revelation as the Word of God, which he had opposed before. Pannenberg admits that he agrees with the literal view of the revelation, on the condition that the revelation of God in history is not ignored.¹⁰ Pannenberg repeats the 7 Theses of the revelation as history in a new way of formulation that could be valid together with the idea of the revelation as the word of God. Pannenberg insists that he didn't oppose the concept of the revelation as the self-revelation of God. He expresses his agreement with Eberhard Jüngel in the sense that the origin of the revelation is God Himself.¹¹ Pannenberg doesn't develop solid criticism of the revelation as the word of God, but only expresses worries for the word theology.

Pannenberg has given three disadvantages of the word of God concept. Firstly, the word of God concept has relation with magical interpretation.¹² Secondly, the word of God concept is related to absoluteness mentality and subjectivism.¹³ Thirdly, the word of God concept tends to reduce the plurality and varieties of the biblical understanding of the word of God.¹⁴ All these three criticisms of

¹⁰ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1988), 260.

¹¹ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 264.

¹² Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 264.

¹³ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 265.

¹⁴ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 265.

the concept of the revelation as the word of God do not necessarily invalidate the concept of the revelation as the word of God. What Pannenberg has achieved is repeating the 7 theses of the indirectness, the eschatological dimension, and the publicity, the historical Jesus as the bearer of the meaning, the interrelatedness, the universality, the plurality of the word of the self-revelation of God. What is significant in his new formulation is the admittance of Jesus Christ as the word of God.¹⁵ Moreover, he has clarified his criticism of the concept of self-revelation, which originated from German Idealism.

He extends his criticism of Karl Barth's understanding of the revelation as the word of God to Schelling and Hegel. What Pannenberg could not agree upon is the identification of the content of the revelation as the subject of God Himself and the idea of Christianity as the absolute religion.¹⁶ Although Schelling and Hegel interpreted the concept of revelation as part of the whole process of world history, the influence of Kant's moral teachings has led to two different thoughts of the understanding of the revelation. Firstly, the revelation is within the whole process of human experience of God in history. Secondly, the revelation is confined to the individual religious experience.¹⁷ According to Pannenberg, Schleiermacher, Carl Immanuel Nitzsch and Richard Rothe built up the concept of the revelation as being above the natural order of history. Under such influence, Martin Kähler and Karl Barth developed the concept of the self-revelation of God through the medium of the Scriptures and Jesus Christ. Although Barth still has a bilateral understanding of the revelation as word and deed, he places the deed of God beneath the

¹⁵ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 281.

¹⁶ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 244.

¹⁷ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 245.

category of the word of God.¹⁸ In my opinion, Pannenberg has shifted his focus of criticism of the concept of the revelation as self-revelation itself into the consequence of self-revelation as a historical disclosure of God. In *Offenbarung als Geschichte*, Pannenberg claimed that there is no corresponding concept of self-revelation in the New Testament.¹⁹ Pannenberg admits in the *Systematische Theologie Band 1* that he hasn't developed exactly the New Testament concept of revelation.²⁰ After evaluation he wants to avoid the consequence of rejecting the possibility of integration of the concept of the revelation as history and as the word of God.²¹

IV. Doctrine of the Trinity as the Ground of Historically Based Christology

Pannenberg realized the danger of Feuerbach's anthropological theology. He regards the exploration of the historical dimension in theology as a response to Feuerbach's challenge of the projection of human expectation on the idea of God. He disagrees with the idea of God's revelation and salvation in super-history. He appears to argue for a one and the same history that conveys both divine and secular meaning. Pannenberg offers the view that we should stop

¹⁸ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 248.

¹⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Offenbarung als Geschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961, 1982 [5 Auflage]), 8.

²⁰ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 249.

²¹ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 249-50. "Die von vielen Seiten heftig geäußerte Kritik kreiste daher um die vermeintliche Alternative: Wort Gottes oder Geschichte. Nun war zwar in der Tat bestritten worden, dass der Gedanke der Offenbarung Gottes mit dem Begriff des Wortes Gottes in seinen sehr unterschiedlichen biblischen Verwendungsweisen ohne weiteres gleichzusetzen sei, aber damit war die Frage nach dem genaueren Verhältnis beider noch nicht entschieden."

using a dualistic concept of divine and profane when interpreting human history. When he defines human history containing so-called religious or ultimate meaning, the next issue is the hermeneutical issue. How could mere humans discover the divine and ultimate meaning? What Pannenberg has done is to argue for the unity of fact and meaning. Pannenberg tries very hard to build the objective ground of the historical revelation of God. The most significant event is the resurrection of Jesus. As the death and burial of Jesus was a historical event and is affirmed by biblical and extra-biblical historical evidence, the resurrection of Jesus was an incident happening in human history but not seen by all public audiences. That means we could not argue for a universal affirmation of the resurrection of Jesus by objective historical reason. Pannenberg turns his attention to the historical context of the resurrection event and argues that the New Testament apocalyptic context conveys the meaning for the resurrection. As a result, he regards his interpretation as resolving the tension between fact and meaning and avoids applying supernatural element as a bearer of meaning for historical events. However, if the doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of Pannenberg's theology, it is quite natural for the doctrine of the Trinity to be the ultimate ground of the meaning of Jesus' resurrection. When we trace the issue where the meaning of the apocalypticism comes from, we cannot confine ourselves within the immanent meaning of the historical event, but neglect the transcendent source of meaning. Therefore, the meaning of the resurrection of Jesus should be defined by the doctrine of the Trinity. After developing his doctrine of the Trinity, Pannenberg realizes that he has to refocus his earlier understanding of Christology from below and revelation as history in order to integrate with his doctrine of the Trinity. The meaning of Jesus' resurrection comes not only from the apocalyptic context, but also from God the being. The identity of Jesus as the Son of God becomes a proper starting point of Christology again.

When Pannenberg accepts that the starting point of Christology is the Incarnate Son of God, he shifts his focus of Christology. Why does Pannenberg shift his understanding of Christology from below to the doctrine of Trinity? In my opinion, Christology from below cannot promise any possibility of reaching the transcendental reality. It is extremely difficult to start from human historical reason to search for the divinity of the humanity of Jesus, without a pre-supposition of the divinity of Jesus from the very beginning. One looks for a public witness of a historical event that shows clearly the intervention of God in human history. In this sense it is an objective historical reasoning. However, the "revelation as history" project itself has an internal difficulty that human reason cannot go beyond the phenomenon into the noumenon. Pannenberg is correct in saying that God's revelation is indirect revelation through historical events. Our knowledge of God is possible only through God's act in human history. As God's acts in human history are the creation, salvation and consummation which was revealed in the scriptures, the idea of the revelation as history is correct in the sense that the scriptures affirm God's actions in Israelite and the Apostles' histories. Therefore, there is no such idea of the revelation as history outside the scriptures. Pannenberg never gives up his criticism of the authority of the Bible, but only rehabilitates the role of the word of God and the historical Jesus as the Son of God sent from eternity.²²

²² Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 2*, 328. "Eine Gesamtdarstellung der christlichen Lehre hingegen muss versuchen, die 'Christologie von unten' in den Zusammenhang ihres umfassenderen Ökonomie seines Handelns in und mit der Welt zu integrieren."

V. The Existence of God as the Ground of Epistemology

The contribution of Pannenberg's Christology from Below provides a common starting point for the search of the Christian faith. The historical reason is the common epistemological ground for discerning the truth. Pannenberg has the intention to build up Christian theology as a public discipline. Pannenberg takes anthropology as a common platform for interdisciplinary dialogue. However, his shift of the focus of his theology shows clearly that the rational approach of theology cannot prove the existence of God. What Pannenberg has done was to argue rationally for the divinity of Jesus Christ and the existence of God. His method of theology is an apologetic approach with a strong enlightenment character. However, his integration of the Christology from Below with the doctrine of the Trinity shows that the anthropological and historical approach to Christology has also presupposed the existence of God and the divinity of Jesus Christ. Theological construction itself is not only a rational or logical deduction, but also the expression of the faithful encounter between God and human beings.²³

However, Pannenberg differentiates between the content of faith and the way we believe. The content of faith will be tested by the future and final criteria of truth. The way we believe is a subjective understanding of the truth. Therefore what we believe now could be true or false, and in this sense the scientific and rational construction is necessary for faith.²⁴ Pannenberg points out that we have to prove

²³ Paul Althaus, "Offenbarung als Geschichte und Glaube: Bemerkungen zu Wolfhart Pannenberg's Begriff der Offenbarung," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 87:5 (1962): 322. Paul Althaus has pointed out the weakness of Pannenberg's rational approach to theology that the role of faith and the Holy Spirit were put into the second order after reason.

²⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Den Glauben an ihm selbst fassen und verstehen," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 86:3 (1989): 369.

the truth of the Christian Dogmatics, and let the Christian Dogmatics be the true revelation of God. Pannenberg regards God Himself as the final authority to judge the content of faith.²⁵ He is correct in the sense that there is no common consensus of Christian Dogmatics among different denominations. His critical attitude towards Dogmatics as the theological interpretation could avoid overemphasis or radical position. However, when God is the final criteria of truth, the question of how to determine the content of the self-revelation of God is not yet answered. The historical or even an eschatological understanding of the self-revelation of God is still a formal concept without defining clearly the content of the self-revelation of God. Therefore, the question about the relation of the Dogmatics, which represents the temporal description of truth, with the final truth at the end of human history is an important question.²⁶

Eberhard Jüngel points out that there is a lack of existential dimension of the content of faith in Pannenberg's dogmatics. Jüngel is correct that God is not only a concept for understanding, but also at the same time the source of wisdom for understanding. He proposes an integration of faith and reason when a person is in Christ or in Spirit. When God the object of faith has a relation with us, our reason of faith (*das Wissen des Glaubens*) will transform the theoretical reason into practical reason, which governs the area of faith.²⁷ Pannenberg realizes

²⁵ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 26. "Erst die endgültige Offenbarung Gottes am Ende der Geschichte wird die endgültige Erkenntnis über Inhalt und Wahrheit seines Handelns in Jesus von Nazareth mit sich bringen. Keinem anderen als Gott selbst kann die Kompetenz zu endgültiger Belehrung über sein Handeln in der Geschichte zukommen."

²⁶ Eberhard Jüngel, "Nihil divinitatis, ubi non fides: Ist christliche Dogmatik in rein theologischer Perspektive möglich? Bemerkungen zu einem theologischen Entwurf von Rang," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 86:2 (1989): 207. Jüngel raised an important question: "Wie aber soll die Dogmatik die Gegenwart derjenigen Wahrheit vertreten können, deren endgültige Offenbarung bis zum Ende der Geschichte noch aussteht?"

²⁷ Eberhard Jüngel, "Nihil divinitatis, ubi non fides: Ist christliche Dogmatik in rein theologischer Perspektive möglich? Bemerkungen zu einem theologischen Entwurf von Rang," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 86:2 (1989): 234.

the issue and answers that it will be discussed in Volume three of his *Systematische Theologie*.²⁸ Pannenberg on the one hand agrees that the subjective and existential dimension of the understanding of the final and eschatological truth plays a role in present understanding of truth in the form of Dogmatics. He has a fear that the overshadowing of existential interpretation of truth will lead us astray from the final and eschatological truth. However, it is debatable whether all our experience of God is the human projection as Ludwig Feuerbach said. Pannenberg presupposes the truth as the transcendental ground of the self-revelation of God as history and as the word of God. However it is still unclear for our understanding of the self-revelation of God as history and as the word of God. Pannenberg questions the concept of the authority of the Bible and also the consensus of Church Dogmas, but we don't have any other means than the Bible and Church Dogmas or proclamation to reach God. The transcendental ground that Pannenberg wants to build up is at the end his premise of the existence of God. However, how can we start from an anthropological horizon of the Christology from below approach to theology, but suddenly add another premise of the existence of God, and still claim it as a justifiable approach as a theology from below? What Pannenberg has done shows that pure Christology from below is impossible. In my opinion, it is also impossible to confine the revelation of God to history. Pannenberg has shifted his focus into revelation as history and as the Word of God. However, he has to develop further the existential dimension of faith to disclose the revelatory function of human encounter with God.

²⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Den Glauben an ihm selbst fassen und verstehen," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 86:3 (1989): 369.

In his third volume of *Systematische Theologie*, Pannenberg points out that the approach to truth is by faith in an Israelite context, and the Greek's approach to the truth is by reason.²⁹ Pannenberg tries to apply Martin Luther's understanding of faith to integrate the Hebrew and Greek approaches to the truth. In this point Pannenberg is concerned about the religious experience as a way to approach the truth. According to Martin Luther, faith has three meanings: trust (*fiducia*), knowledge (*notitia*), and certainty (*assensus*). Pannenberg explains that the objective dimensions presuppose the trust for the future in existential dimension of faith: knowledge and certainty.³⁰ Pannenberg is correct in building up the objective ground of faith and also giving a role of existential religious experience in perceiving the historical revelation of God in Jesus Christ.³¹ However, Pannenberg hasn't followed the consequence of his approach of theology in his first volume of *Systematische Theologie* that interprets Christian theology from the context of the reality of all humankind. Pannenberg on the one hand wants to build up a public theology that has universal relevance, but when he goes into details, he cannot escape to base his views on a dogmatic position.

²⁹ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 3* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 156.

³⁰ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 3*, 159.

³¹ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 3*, 172. "Dabei brauchen Kenntnissnahme und Zustimmung nicht eigens für sich thematisiert oder gar in ihrer Problematik erfasst zu sein, aber sie sind als Voraussetzungen des Vertrauens auf den in Jesus Christus offenbaren Gott in jedem christlichen Glaubensakt mitgesetzt."

VI. The Doxological Dimension of Theology and the Transformation of the Spirituality

Pannenberg's theology gives us an impression of a rational tone, however, Pannenberg has mentioned the idea of Doxology in the context of the coherency of the truth. According to Pannenberg, the final and eschatological truth will fulfill the unity of history, the unity of the world and God and also the coherency of the Christian doctrines.³² Other than the self-revelation of God as history and as the Word of God, Pannenberg mentions the third category, namely that the Holy Spirit works in the heart of a person.³³ However, Pannenberg has such a negative understanding of piety that he will not take religious experience as a way of approaching the truth. Pannenberg understands the subjective dimensions of truth, but does not emphasize them. What he is concerned about is the public and universal dimension of the truth.³⁴

In my opinion, Pannenberg is correct in proposing the concept of public and universal truth. However, the next question is how the public and universal truth becomes my personal truth: How the ultimate truthful God inspires and enlightens us to recognize his self-revelation as history and the Word of God. On this point, I would like to use the idea of participating knowledge from Thomas F. Torrance to elaborate our relation with God. Only through our faith in God will the Holy Spirit work in us through the objective salvation power of Jesus Christ. The realistic understanding of the revelation enables us to recognize God's work in history and encounter our Triune God in our experience. The advantage of the Christology from below is to base

³² Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 66.

³³ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 66.

³⁴ Pannenberg, *Systematische Theologie Band 1*, 60.

on human experience and interaction with Jesus Christ to discover his divinity. The existence of God is not from the very beginning presupposed and the historical reason serves as an objective receptor of God's revelation as an historical event. However, the limitation of the Christology from below is its dependence on human reason. What's wrong with Christology when it presupposes the existence of God and the Incarnation of the Son of God in Jesus Christ? Our Christian faith starts with faith in the existence of the Triune God through the scripture. Through the scriptures we have the christo-centric faith. The faith in the reality of God enables us to receive the revelation of God in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. The reception of the revelation of God is not only through our reason, but also through our spiritual relation with God.

The celebration of our participation in God's Being is an expression of our spiritual life and worship life. Our faith in God and worship in God links up our God as our Ground of Being to our own being. Christo-centrally speaking, we are in Christ and Christ is in us. Pneumatologically speaking, we are in the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is in us. Our knowledge of God is not in the sense of collecting data about God, but the inner spiritual relationship with God. It is extremely important for the enlightenment influence on theological epistemology that we leave room for the Holy Spirit and faith. As a Hong Kong Chinese Christian theologian, I appreciate Pannenberg's great theological system, however, I wonder if he has gone only part of the way as he shifts his focus on Christology after building up his doctrine of the Trinity. It is an Eastern (Eastern Orthodox) or even a particularly Chinese way of understanding knowledge in relationships. Through personal piety and collective worship, we experience encounters with God in Spirit and know not only the acts of God in history, but also God's acts in my personal history. If we don't

experience God as our personal God, we don't know who God is and we just talk about the acts of God as historical events.

Pannenberg has developed his understanding of Spirit as energy in field theory, with the intention of promoting dialogue with natural science. However, Pannenberg neglects the personal dimensions of the Holy Spirit that open our horizon of understanding to the level of spiritual matters. Pannenberg follows the enlightenment's understanding of history and borrows from Gadamer's idea of fusion of horizon to interpret the Resurrection of Jesus. However, he does not develop the idea of the Holy Spirit as a personal spirit that empowers our human reason to build up spiritual relations with God. To my understanding, Pannenberg is correct in developing his doctrine of the Trinity, however he doesn't build up the idea of doxology and spirituality. He maintains his theological construction within the limitations of reason. Pannenberg's Systematic Theology is indeed a great theological work in the last century; however, it is important for systematic theology to broaden the interpretation area from doctrine to ethics and spirituality.

ABSTRACT

This paper is a critical evaluation of the development of Wolfhart Pannenberg's Christological thought. In comparing the *Grundzuge der Christologie* (1964) and *Systematische Theologie Band 2* (1992), Pannenberg has shifted the focus of Christology from the Christology from below to the integration of the Christology from below and the Christology from above. In comparing *Offenbarung als Geschichte* (1961) and *Systematische Theologie Band 1* (1988), Pannenberg has also shifted his understanding of Revelation from Revelation as History to Revelation as History and the Word of God. The change of Pannenberg's Christological focus could be explained by the development of his Doctrine of Trinity between 1964 and 1991. The development of Pannenberg's Christology shows that the historically based Christology should be grounded on the transcendental dimension of God, which is beyond human reason and must be encountered by faith. Therefore, Pannenberg's rational and historical approach of Christology should be supplemented by the doxological dimension of theology, thereby putting greater emphasis on the transformation of spirituality.

撮 要

本篇論文乃對潘能伯格基督論發展的批判性評估。比較1964年出版的《耶穌：神而人者》及1992出版的《系統神學卷二》，潘能伯格將基督論的重點由從下而上的進路轉變為從下而上與從上而下兩種進路的整合。比較1961年出版的《啟示乃歷史》及1988出版的《系統神學卷一》潘能伯格將啟示觀的重點由啟示乃歷史轉變為啟示乃歷史與啟示乃歷史及上帝話語兩種進路的整合。潘能伯格基督論重點的發展可以解釋為其自1964至1991年間三一論發展的結果。潘能伯格基督論的發展表明建基歷史的基督論必需植根於上帝的超越性，這是遠超人類理性而必須以信心與上帝相遇的。潘能伯格提出的基督論較着重理性及歷史進路，有需要從神學頌讚的向度加以補充，藉以加強靈命更新的重要性。