CHAPTER 16

Vector Fields as the Empirical Correlate of the Spirit(s): A Meta-Pannenbergian Approach to Pneumatological Pluralism

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Introduction

Wolfhart Pannenberg’s pneumatology is unique in the use of the concept of a field of force in modern physics to conceptualize the Spirit of God. Objections from other theologians, especially those most knowledgeable in physics, were swift to come. This chapter proposes a revision of Pannenberg’s use of the field metaphor to overcome these objections. My thesis is that instead of looking at fields of forces in physics as the locus of the activity and description of the Spirit, it is not only more scientifically accurate but also more theologically fruitful to correlate the Spirit with the vector fields that guide the dynamics of all physical, biological, social, and historical phenomena. Such revision is significant because unlike fields of forces, vector fields can be posited at every level of organization in the cosmos. Similar to David Ray Griffin’s proposal but without recourse to process philosophy, the payoff “is that there may be many spirits or spiritual realities in the world, but rather than being transcendental, disembodied, and self-conscious entities they are naturally embedded in the dynamic processes of the world.”

Motivations for a New Pneumatology

Pannenberg’s Pneumatology

Wolfhart Pannenberg always endeavored to make a case for the public relevance of theology in response to the challenges of modernity, postmodernity, and the liberal and pietistic Christian reactions to such challenges, all of which would have relegated religion into the private sphere indifferent to the public concerns of society and immune from critiques of public discourse. For Pannenberg, one way
to public relevance and universal validity of Christian theology is for it to critically appropriate the sciences and lay theological claims to scientific understandings.\(^6\) When Pannenberg desires that theology be made a public and rigorous academic discipline, it is not only theology as a whole but specifically pneumatology that must be made so. Pannenberg deplores that contrary to the biblical portrait of the Spirit of God being involved in every divine activity in the world, Western theology restricted the work of the Spirit to soteriological functions and pietistic subjectivism, especially when the spirit was identified with the mind, and thus disconnected from God’s universal activities in creation.\(^7\) When theology subsequently attempted to separate the Spirit from the human mind, “theological talk about the divine spirit lost its last empirical correlate, and consequently it has become almost meaningless.”\(^8\) Traditional Western pneumatology not only failed to give a biblical account of the Spirit but also led to anthropocentrism, atheism, subjectivism, meaninglessness, and privatization of theology. To redeem pneumatology from these, theology must overcome the subjective bias of traditional Christian piety, and the only way to do so is through “an understanding of the spirit on the basis of his function in creation and this [sic] regard to his contribution to an explanation of nature.”\(^9\) In other words, pneumatology must be reconnected to a theology of nature that lays theological claim to scientific understandings. Theology must find an “empirical correlate” to the spirit, different from the human mind, that will locate the Spirit’s function in the whole cosmos, and thus be able to appropriate the natural sciences. The question is, “Can we in any intellectually serious way attribute a function in the explanation of nature to the Holy Spirit?”\(^10\) What is the Spirit’s empirical correlate? By “empirical correlate,” Pannenberg does not mean evidence for the existence or work of the Spirit in the empirical sciences. Rather, he means a principle in an explanation of nature that theology may appropriate not scientifically but theologically. It is that part of empirical reality, not with which the Spirit is identified, but to which the Spirit corresponds.\(^11\)

The Spirit as a Field of Force

Pannenberg’s discovery of a new empirical correlate of the Spirit began in the phenomenology of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, which claimed that energy is always the physical manifestation of a spiritual reality.\(^12\) This is true especially for energy that allows an entity to transcend itself and evolve into a higher form. As the physical correlate of the Spirit, however, it must be both immanent and transcendent as the Spirit is. In other words, energy can be the Spirit’s correlate in the empirical world only if it is conceived of as a field, which not only is contained within a thing, but also has, in principle, infinite spatiotemporal extension, as Michael Faraday claimed.\(^13\) Pannenberg sees Faraday giving priority to fields of forces over bodies, so that the spiritual transcends the material. “Faraday,” claims Pannenberg, “regarded bodies themselves as forms of forces that for their part are no longer qualities of bodies but independent realities that are ‘givens’ for bodily phenomena.”\(^14\) In response to his critics, Pannenberg reiterates this: “My own