

SALVATION-HISTORY: PANNENBERG'S CRITIQUE OF CULLMANN

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I. Introduction

We focus attention here on just one piece of Wolfhart Pannenberg's multi-dimensional theological enterprise, namely his treatment of the idea of Salvation-history, or more specifically Oscar Cullmann's idea of Salvation-history. Further, we allow Pannenberg to speak for himself in the following paragraphs translated from his article "Heilsgeschichte und Weltgeschichte,"¹ an article which, for all its importance, has not been made accessible to English readers.

As everyone with a rudimentary knowledge of Pannenberg's work knows, history is the fundamental category of his theology.² It behooves us therefore to avail ourselves of any illumination of his view of history, not only for the sake of this particular and central concept, but also for the sake of an understanding of his whole theology. Furthermore, we have in the particular paragraphs which follow a sort of *via negativa* to Pannenberg's thinking, an unexpectedly stark and helpful statement of what his theological idea of history *is not*. He addresses and criticizes the conception of *Heilsgeschichte* or "Salvation-history" as sponsored by Oscar Cullmann. Cullmann's work in general, and his concept of Salvation-history in particular, are widely familiar, and for a large block of theological readers, determinative.³ Aside, then from the intrinsic significance of Cullmann's idea, it may provide for many a useful "bridge" to Pannenberg's thought.

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¹Wolfhart Pannenberg, "Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschichte," in *Geschichte- Ereignis und Erzählung*, ed. Reinhart Koselleck and Wolf-Dieter Stempel (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1973), pp. 307 ff. The translated passage begins on p. 315. The article was also published in the German Festschrift in honor of Gerhard von Rad: *Probleme biblischer Theologie*, ed. Hans Walter Wolff (Munich: Kaiser, 1971), pp. 349 ff.

²See the essays on history in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*. I (London: SCM Press, 1970), especially "Redemptive Event and History," p. 15 ff.; also "Dogmatic Theses on the Doctrine of Revelation," in *Revelation and History*, ed. Wolfhart Pannenberg (New York: Macmillan, 1969), pp. 123 ff. See also Pannenberg's discussion of historical method in his *Theology and the Philosophy of Science*, tr. Francis McDonagh (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 142 ff. For a brief, introductory discussion of Pannenberg's position, see Allan D. Galloway, *Wolfhart Pannenberg* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1973), Ch. 2.

³See especially Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time*, revised ed., tr. Floyd V. Filson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1964) and *Salvation in History*, tr. Sidney G. Sowers, et al. (New York: Harper & Row, 1967). Also *Christology of the New Testament*, revised ed., tr. Shirley G. Guthrie and Charles A. M. Hall (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963).

Pannenberg's criticism may be summarized as follows. Cullmann's Salvation-history consists of a series of divinely appointed events, related though a continuity and progression for the sake of the supreme saving event of the cross and resurrection of Christ, the center of history. But Cullmann's Salvation-history (or line of saving events) is radically divorced from the rest of history where God also acts salvifically. While granting that some are more relevant than others for man's salvation or "wholeness", Pannenberg seeks to emphasize the unity of *all* history as God's history. More specifically, Cullmann's "special" history within general history must be rejected as a theological construction: it involves a selection of events which depends too much on a "decision of faith" and too little on properly conceived historiographical methods. The decision of faith introduces, in fact, subjective factors (one is tempted to say existentialist-type factors) which render the "special history largely inaccessible (or even recalcitrant) to historical investigation. Thus insulated from historical criticism, Cullmann's Salvation-history immediately falls prey to suspicion. (None of this should obscure, though, Pannenberg's sympathy with Cullmann's intentions. I know for a fact that Pannenberg regards himself and Cullmann as occupying much the same theological ground—though less so than Cullmann thinks—and his purpose is not to attack or reject Cullmann's position but rather to evaluate it critically for the sake of the important truth it embodies.)

These paragraphs leave aside Pannenberg's further and more eschatological concern that Christ, especially understood in his resurrection, should properly be seen not as the center but as the anticipated *End* of history. They do, however, witness to Pannenberg's rigorous intellectualism, that is, his desire that the truth-claims of Christianity be rationally grounded—which indeed he does believe to be the case with the resurrection of Jesus, a fact which has led many conservative thinkers mistakenly to view Pannenberg as an ally.⁴

But the important thing is Pannenberg's own statement. Throughout the following paragraphs⁵ I have rendered the word *Heilsgeschichte* as "Salvation-history"⁶ so as to contrast most effectively with *allgemeine Geschichte*, "general history," etc. I have altered the Paragraphing for greater readability. Pannenberg of course cites the German version of Cullmann's *Salvation in history*; in the English version

⁴See Pannenberg's exhaustive defense of the resurrection in his *Jesus -- God and Man*, tr. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), pp. 53 ff.

⁵Translated with the help from my friend Mr. Louis Janner of Immensee, Switzerland (who is astonished at the way in which German theologians express themselves).

⁶*Heilsgeschichte* is also frequently and correctly rendered as "redemptive-history" or "history of salvation."

(see above, n. 3), most of the passages cited occur in the section, "New Testament Salvation History and History" (pp. 150 ff.).

TRANSLATION

II. Pannenberg's Critique

As with the concept of salvation, so also must the concept of Salvation-history be freed from a certain narrowness which has rendered it obsolete. This involves, primarily, the view that Salvation-history deals with a special history inside the general history of man, corresponding to the view of salvation as a special religious concern standing in contrast to the secular life. Thus O. Cullmann has recently emphasized that "the New Testament Salvation-history differs radically from all history," and he has reproached the older Salvation-historical theology because it had too little emphasized this difference.¹

Though using the expression "Salvation-history," Cullmann proceeds not from the idea of salvation but is thinking rather of a "succession of divine events," attested throughout, the Biblical writings which succession, "for lack of a better expression," is designated as Salvation-history.² We belong to it not by reason of our birth, as we do to the history of our family or heritage, but rather we align ourselves with it by reason of a decision of faith (ibid.). The demarcation of Salvation-history from general history, according to Cullmann, is viewed from the historical standpoint as grounded in an arbitrary selection of events which make up Salvation-history (p. 135). "... according to New Testament faith, God selects only certain, single events, which through a developing salvation-context are bound to one another, and he reveals this salvation-context to the Prophets and Apostles through an act which itself belongs to Salvation-history" (p. 146). In this view, Salvation-history forms only a "very narrow line" (ibid.) within general history, "from the historical standpoint a meaningless connection of a few specific events" (p. 58), contradicts the "law of continuity" (p. 59, cf. p.135).

¹O. Cullmann, *Heil als Geschichte* (Tubingen, 1965), pp. 58 f., 134 f. Cullmann's emphasis on the difference of Salvation-history from the rest of history obviously grows out of his self-defense against the objection raised by K. G. Steck (*Die Idee der Heilsgeschichte* (Zollikon, 1959)), namely, that the application of supernatural principles in the interpretation of history, such as the category of the prophetic by the advocates of Salvation-history, is unhistorical (p. 59, n. 2).

²*Heil als Geschichte*, p. 3. Although Cullmann in a subsequent place gives preference to the term "Salvation-history" over "Revelation history" (p.39), he does not there, either, involve the idea of salvation in making clear the meaning of Salvation-history. (The following page citations refer to the above mentioned work).

Against this stands the objection that every representation of history selects those occurrences which are significant for its particular theme. The History of Salvation selects those events relevant for the salvation of man and leaves all sorts of "gaps" in what remains, and cannot thus convincingly establish its fundamental difference from all other history. It is true, however, that not all events of history are in the same way relevant for the question of salvation, for the question of the wholeness of human life. Here may lie the real point of truth in the position that Salvation-history is characterized by a particular "line" of events within general history.

Nevertheless, Cullmann's assertion of a radical difference of this line from the occurrences of the rest of history remains problematic. Does God work only in this "line" and not also in the other events of history? And is not every act of God, who is love, related in one way or another to the salvation of man? And is not every occurrence in human history and every activity of man Salvation-history, inasmuch as these are related to man's question about himself, about the wholeness of his being?³ Moreover, it need not be questioned that, as Cullmann emphasizes, the connection which is Salvation-history rests "on the tacit assumption" that "the selection of events is affected by God and that in their connection they are traceable to a divine plan" (p. 135). Yet, if man's question of salvation is a theme of all historical occurrences, and if it is most closely bound to the question of God, then one would expect that out of the events themselves would emerge their special Salvation-historical significance and their connection in a "plan" of God. Indeed, Cullmann describes the Salvation-historical experience as one of "being overpowered by the events and by the understanding of their connection" (p. 104). He emphasizes, nevertheless, that this connection can be established "neither by immanent-historical nor philosophical-historical perspectives" (p. 135). This is all the more surprising inasmuch as Cullmann acknowledges the reciprocal conditioning of historical experience ("events") and historical understanding ("meaning") (pp. 70 f.). Furthermore, he speaks of a "priority of the event . . . in the development of all Biblical Salvation-history" (p. 117), and consequently he wants to interpret

³Cullmann touches on the question of the unity of Salvation-history and history (*loc. cit.*) and accepts Rahner's formula of a "Salvation-history in the larger sense." He points out in this place the relation of Salvation-history to the "salvation of all men" and expects a "joining of all history in this line," an "absorbing of profane history in Salvation-history" (p. 146, cf. p. 143). But this perspective is opened up strangely late in Cullmann's exposition. The connection of Salvation-history and history, here expressly acknowledged, does not in Cullmann's explanation affect this "narrow line" of events which constitutes Salvation-history in its proper sense. This rather is formed by abstraction from the context of human history.

the salvation-historical meaning of the occurrence as developing in the hermeneutical process of historical experience: "Every time, when a new event is added, the total perspective is modified in its light, and also the relation to the yet outstanding end-occurrence" (p. 104). Nevertheless the "selection" of the events, which becomes in this way relevant for Salvation-history, remains for Cullmann a "decision of faith" (p. 102), which corresponds to a divine revelation, and which "for the believer" occurs in the event itself (p. 133, esp. note 1). How is this view of the "selection" consistent with Cullmann's stress on "being overpowered by the events and by the understanding of their connection"? Both views can be reconciled only if the selection of the events relevant for Salvation-history would be based once again on the particularity of the peculiar importance of their historical connection. But then such a selection must also be evident to general historical-philosophical views. Because Cullmann rejects this, the revelatory meaning of the events appears with him to presuppose the decision of faith as a prerequisite, so that the revelation, and the interpretation, contrary to Cullmann's intention, acquire the character of something added on to history.

This thesis about the radical difference of Salvation-history must give rise to the suspicion that here certain historical traditions, namely the Biblical, are to be protected against the application of the general principles of historical criticism by the subjectivity of a decision of faith—this in itself is based on the authority of revelation which resists rational judgement. This suspicion is confirmed through Cullmann's suggestion that also mythical "occurrences" (!) "outside of historical space and historical time" (p. 123) belong to Salvation-history. Through this the impression is given that in the sphere of Salvation-history mythical occurrences would be somehow comparable to historical events and could, with them, constitute a common series of events. Should then a judgement of historical criticism, which discerns the unreality of certain asserted occurrences in the tradition, be excluded here from the start? The arrangement of such a protected zone for the content of the Biblical traditions can only discredit the idea of a special line of Salvation-history in the process of world history.

The element of truth in this idea must therefore be defended against some of the ways in which it is developed by Cullmann himself.

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