

## Chapter 4

### MODERN ATHEISM AND THEISM CHALLENGED?

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

Nietzsche's prophecy challenged Christian theology to respond to the nihilistic consequences of the death of God.<sup>23</sup> I intend to discuss the reactions of a few theologians who, in my view, responded to the problem Nietzsche had with the concept of God, as it was propagated in the modern period (cf Küng 1987:157). I will thus focus on Christian theologians such as Barth, Moltmann, Pannenberg and Peters who confronted these challenges. They all responded to Nietzsche's impulse towards the development of a concept of God that can neither lead to atheism nor to theism. There are specific reasons for having chosen these theologians. Barth paved the way of talking about God by defining him as the communicative God who came in Jesus Christ to reconcile God with the human race (cf Berkhof [1982] 1991:87; Fraser 2002:8-10).<sup>24</sup> Moltmann focused on the problem Nietzsche had with the concept of God as propagated by the modern period. God is not only the transcendent God who judges and scorns, but he is also the loving God who understands the suffering and pain of the world. Pannenberg is the theologian who rose to the challenge of Nietzsche by using the philosophy of Hegel, the philosopher with whom Nietzsche had

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<sup>23</sup> The theological response to Nietzsche's philosophy was immense after his death (cf Köster 1982:615-685; Aschheim 1988:218-249; Booth 1992:290-307; Fleischer 1991:17-19).

<sup>24</sup> "Barths >>Theologie der Krise<<, dann >>dialektische Theologie<< genannt, forderte angesichts des Zusammenbruchs von Gesellschaft und Kultur, der Institutionen, Traditionen und Autoritäten, eine paradigmatische Wende: weg von der subjectiven Erfahrung und dem frommen Gefühl, hin zur Bibel; weg von der Historie, hin zur Offenbarung Gottes; weg von der religiösen Rede über den Gottesbegriff, hin zur Verkündigung des Wortes Gottes; weg von Religion und Religiosität, hin zum christlichen Glauben; weg von den religiösen Bedürfnissen des Menschen, hin zu Gott, der der >>ganz Andere<< ist, offenbar allein in Jesus Christus" (Küng 1987:229).

serious problems. Peters' theology shows close similarities to the theology of Pannenberg, but goes further by taking us past the dilemmas of theism and atheism.

These theologians have much in common. All of them, except Peters, experienced the consequences of the ideology Nietzsche warned against, namely the idea of the power of history moving to greater heights. All of them reacted to the historicism of Hegel. Barth experienced the consequences of World War I and II, having been expelled from his teaching position in Bonn for speaking out against the regime of Hitler. Moltmann and Pannenberg were forced to join the Nazi army, and Moltmann was imprisoned for three years (cf Moltmann 1991b:222). They all made use of Nietzsche's view and prophecies as a point of reference. Barth, while agreeing with Nietzsche that the god of the nineteenth century was a "Nicht-Gott" (Barth [1922] 1924:96), also reacted to the god of Natural theology and later also to the god of Schleiermacher. Moltmann agreed with Nietzsche that humankind had constructed its own god, which did not exist, and corrected Nietzsche by saying that God had died, but on the cross. But instead of remaining in the grave, Jesus was resurrected. He is therefore the living God. God is the God of the future. Pannenberg agreed that Nietzsche was a prophet of his time, and that his critique must be viewed as a reaction against the concept of God as understood in his time (cf Pannenberg 1975:72). Pannenberg tried to correct Nietzsche's critique of Hegel's idea of the "absolute Geist" by stating that God could reveal himself, but that it was not, as Nietzsche had said, a teleological necessity. Peters developed a theology of this future God, that would in my view, meet the challenges of atheism and theism.

## 4.2 KARL BARTH'S CHALLENGE TO ATHEISM AND THEISM

### 4.2.1 Introduction<sup>25</sup>

Barth ([1919] 1985:164) agreed with Nietzsche's view of the nineteenth century as the era of progress.<sup>26</sup>

I will attempt to show that Barth was a theologian, along with others such as Bonhoeffer, Moltmann and Pannenberg, who experienced the consequences of the philosophy of progress in history and teleological development, namely World War I (in the case of Barth) and later World War II – consequences that Nietzsche prophetically warned about.<sup>27</sup>

To Barth the important issue of his time was not the ideas of progress and teleological development, but the fact that the kingdom of God had come near. The real promises were not those created by ideas of progress, but the new possibilities that the new life in Christ brought about. "Das Reich Gottes ist nahe herbeigekommen [Mk.1, 15]. *Das* ist der Grund, darauf wir uns gründen. Nicht der Fortschritt und die Entwicklung innerhalb der bisherigen Möglichkeiten, sondern die neue Lebensmöglichkeit, die im Christus geschaffen ist, die neue Kreatur in ihm" (Barth [1919] 1985:164-165). He agreed with Nietzsche that God could not be a prisoner of history (Barth [1924/25] 1990:68-70). Therefore he attempted

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<sup>25</sup> For more biographical details of Barth, I recommend the book by Busch (1976).

<sup>26</sup> Barth agreed with Nietzsche that God is not in history, nor in nature, nor in a human being (cf Ten Kate 1999:9-31).

<sup>27</sup> Barth (1951:446) credits Nietzsche for his prophecy, which had been fulfilled to the letter. According to Nietzsche the "Wille zur Macht" would be the content of the new commandment, which will dissolve Christian morality and achieve dominance in the twentieth century.

(with his Eschatological theology) to provide an answer to the challenge of Nietzsche's quest for a living God (see Barth [1924/25] 1990:68-70). Like Nietzsche, he realised that the god of teleology in history (progress in history) was dead. For Barth the god of teleology in history was nothing more than the projection of people's own injustice. Such a god is nothing but an idol. In the face of such a god, we must become sceptics and atheists (Barth 1924:9-14).

#### **4.2.2 Atheism and theism challenged**

When one reads the works of Barth, it becomes evident that his student days at Marburg played a decisive role in his theology. His thinking was influenced by the likes of Ritschl, Herrmann, Cohen and Natorp. Herrmann was an ethical theologian. He in turn was deeply influenced by Kant, interpreting and criticising Kant's work in his quest to solve the problem of religion. Ritschl stressed the importance of the self-revelation of God in the historical Jesus who became the Christ. According to the Marburg philosophers three valid spheres of knowledge were to be found. The question was to which of these, the logico-scientific, ethical, or aesthetic, if any, religion belong to. These philosophers could not accept a God who stood outside the thinking rationale of human beings. Natorp tried to solve this problem by modifying Schleiermacher's understanding of religion as a "Gefühl" (Fisher 1988:73). It was evident that no God existed for Natorp. Religion was only possible in the sphere of aesthetic feeling. Cohen put religion in the sphere of ethics. The relation between God and the world rested on logical and not personal

reasons. These insights influenced Barth's thinking later on when he was a pastor in Safenwil.<sup>28</sup>

Barth (1911] 1993:387) stated that the social movement was the will of God in their time. He believed that Jesus taught humankind a way of life and not merely a number of ideas. One can be an atheist and still be a follower of Jesus (see Barth [1911] 1993:390-391). Barth added that the way of life, which Jesus propagated, was to care for the poor, to establish the kingdom of God on this earth, to renounce any idea of self-enrichment and to make one's fellow men and women one's brothers and sisters in faith. Political theology and the questions it raises in the form of Liberation theology challenges modern atheism that deals not with faith as such, but with the practices of faith. These theologies see modern atheism as a practical and political problem that can be solved by a new practice, which Barth propagated.

When World War I broke out, Barth was convinced that it was the judgement of God (cf Fähler 1979). It was God's judgement for the sins of the human race. He did not realise the consequences of such a statement – that he was interpreting the events in history as the ways of God. Nietzsche reacted against this notion of depicting God as a prisoner of history, for it could only lead to atheism. Later Barth rejected, as Nietzsche, the idea of interpreting world events as the way of God. This was evident in his questioning of the Germans' "Kriegstheologie", according to which God was on the side of the Germans (Barth, in

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<sup>28</sup> The book by Fisher (1988) provides a detailed description of this time in Barth's life.

McCormack 1997:113). Barth eventually came to the conclusion that God alone could make this decision.

To challenge modern atheism, Barth stressed the importance of God as the self-revealing subject, as the wholly other. Barth would never again return to idealism.<sup>29</sup> He believed that the only certainty, above and beyond history, was the kingdom of God. Barth realised that the kingdom of God was a present and a future (already and not yet) reality. Barth believed that socialism was the most important sign of the coming of the kingdom of God. God, as the righteous one, had to decide what the position of the unrighteous human beings should be. Human beings could never be righteous. To be righteous means to be God. At this stage of his life, Barth agreed with Nietzsche that Christianity, as a following of Christ, was an illusion (cf Barth 1924:12). God is God in opposition to the humans, who are the unrighteous. He also stressed the coming of the kingdom of God and that human beings did not have the capacity or the means to know God. God is not a possession of the human race. In his book *Der Römerbrief* (1919) much criticism is levelled at liberal historicism, idealism, Christian religion and religious socialism.<sup>30</sup>

In order to maintain the dualism between God and humankind, Barth applied the terminology of eschatology and history. This theme of the eschatological reality of God

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<sup>29</sup> Pannenberg (1988b:244-245) says that Hegel influenced Barth and although Barth said that he would never return to idealism, Barth could not fully escape it as is evidenced in his discussion of Hegel (cf Barth 1960). Price (2002:55-60) says that although Hegel's "dialectical idealism" shaped Barth's theology, Barth rejected Hegel's idea of God as a "dialectical method".

<sup>30</sup> In his book, *Der Römerbrief* ([1919] 1985:53) Barth makes use of Nietzsche's "Umwertung aller Werte" as a heading for his interpretation of Romans 2:14-29. Like Nietzsche Barth ([1919] 1985:164-165) also criticises the belief of progress in history.

became more important in his later works (cf Dalferth 1989:20-27). He distinguished between two kinds of history: the “*eigentliche Geschichte*” and the “*sogenannte Geschichte*” (cf Barth [1919] 1985:46). The “*sogenannte Geschichte*” is our history of this world, our history of unrighteousness and sin. Then there is the “*eigentliche Geschichte*”, which is the history of God. Barth’s main problem was reconciling these two histories. This he tried to achieve by stating that the “*eigentliche Geschichte*” entered the “*sogenannte Geschichte*” in Jesus Christ. “*Eine neue Weltzeit ist angebrochen: das Ende aller Zeiten*” (Barth [1919] 1985:86). Another way of referring to these histories is by means of the relation between eschatology and history. What Barth wanted to achieve with this dialectical relating of “*eigentliche Geschichte*” and “*sogenannte Geschichte*”, is clear. He wanted to put the movement and action of God in history beyond the reach of historical investigation. To say that an event has occurred in space and time, which does not belong to space and time, is the same as an event of which the source lies outside the space-time continuum. This becomes especially clear when Barth speaks of the history of God as “*verborgene Gottesgeschichte*”.<sup>31</sup>

In *Der Römerbrief* (1919) Barth stresses the necessity to speak of God as the one who possesses us through his Spirit. There is by no means a way by which we as humans can know God. “*Unsre Sache ist unsre im Christus realisierte Erkenntnis Gottes, in der uns Gott nicht gegenständlich, sondern unmittelbar und schöpferisch nahetritt, in der wir nicht nur schauen, sondern geschaut werden, nicht nur verstehen, sondern verstanden*”

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<sup>31</sup> To Smith (1983:27) “*verborgene Gottesgeschichte*” means that God’s kingdom, although it is not part of our history, becomes active and actual in our history. Barth tried with his *Der Römerbrief* (1919 and 1922) to speak of the presence of God in history in such a way that it is unmistakably clear that he is not of history (cf Mueller 1972:25).

*sind*, nicht nur begreifen, sondern *ergriffen* sind” (Barth [1919] 1985:158). Barth believed God revealed himself to us in the life, cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He gave us a new life in Jesus. “Wir wurden mit ihm begraben durch die Taufe auf seinen Tod, damit, wie der Christus von den Toten erweckt wurde durch die Herrlichkeit des Vaters, so auch wir in einem neuen Leben wandeln sollten....Wir haben *ein* Reich verlassen, indem wir in ein *anderes* übergegangen sind. Unser Nein kommt aus einem Ja heraus” (Barth [1919] 1985:214). In the resurrection the revelation of God becomes apparent. Faith is not an experience or a psychological reaction of human beings. It comes only from God.

The postwar time in Germany was chaotic, and the effect it had on Barth’s theology, especially as expressed in the second commentary on Romans, was somewhat problematic. It should be noted that whenever he referred to “Kampf” in *Der Römerbrief* (1922), he did not mean the struggle of postwar Germany. The “Kampf” he was referring to was the judgement of God as it pertained to all people, as well as the crisis resulting from the fact that we did not know this loving God. “Der Kampf der Guten mit den Bösen ist aus. Die Menschen treten in eine Linie. Ihr Verborgenes steht im Gericht vor Gott, aber vor Gott allein. Aber das Gericht Gottes ist das Ende der Geschichte, nicht der Anfang einer neuen zweiten Geschichte” (Barth [1922] 1924:51). This is indeed a “Kampf”, as no one will escape the judgement of God. To Barth, this “Kampf” is also embedded in a christological understanding, namely in the revelation of Jesus Christ.



Christus ist “für uns gestorben”. “Für uns”, sofern dieses Sterben Erkenntnisprinzip unsres Sterbens ist, sofern in diesem Sterben der unanschauliche Gott für uns anschaulich wird, sofern dieses Sterben der Ort ist, wo die Versöhnung mit Gott stattfindet (3, 25 5, 9): wo wir, das vom Schöpfer abgewandte Geschöpf, ihm liebend wieder zugekehrt werden, sofern in diesem Sterben das Paradox der Gerechtigkeit Gottes (die Identität zwischen seiner zürnenden Heiligkeit und seiner freisprechenden Barmherzigkeit) für uns Wahrheit wird.

(Barth [1922] 1924:137)

It is the struggle that occurs when we realise that we do not know this God, the God who is totally different from all other gods that we may know, which, referring to this uncertainty, in the end, may lead to atheism. Through Kierkegaard<sup>32</sup> Barth gained some insight into the problematic understanding of the incarnation of God. The incarnation of God comes only from him and can never be a human possibility. It was also from Kierkegaard that he got to know the style of indirect communication and developed a critical understanding of Christianity as a religion. According to Barth, God as the unknowable must become knowable to the human race. This can only happen where human beings

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<sup>32</sup> Upon receiving the Danish Sonning Award in Copenhagen in 1963, Barth made mention of Kierkegaard in his acceptance, saying: “In light of these later insights, I am and remain thankful as before to Kierkegaard for the immunization [sic] he gave me in those days. I am and remain filled with deep respect for the genuinely tragic nature of his life and for the extraordinary intellectual luster [sic] of his work. I consider him a teacher into whose school every theologian must go once. Woe to the one who has missed it! So long as one does not remain in or return to it” (Zellweger-Barth 1986:22)!

receive God's revelation, presence and reality. But the knowledge that human beings have of God is always dependent upon God's sanction and enterprise (cf Mueller 1972:29).

Barth ([1922] 1924:78-79) tried to deal with the revelation of God in history without mentioning that it came from history. He said that Jesus was a historical figure who lived with and like other people on earth. Although the knowledge of God in *Der Römerbrief* (1922) stands in the shadow of Kant, Barth was not speaking of God in metaphysical terms, or of the god of his time, which as he states in *Der Römerbrief* (1922) is "Nicht-Gott". Rather, he was speaking of a humanly constructed idol. He again agreed with Nietzsche that the God of their time indeed was *dead* or "Nicht-Gott" (Barth [1922] 1924:96).<sup>33</sup>

Barth stated the importance of the concept of God. God could not be used as a predicate to describe the infinite or to describe that, which is not human. Humans must admit that it is actually impossible to adequately describe or speak of God.

Immer ist Gott dem Menschen jenseitig, neu, fern, fremd, überlegen,  
nie in seinem Bereich, nie in seinem Besitz, immer sagt Wunder, wer  
Gott sagt....Sofern es menschlicherseits zu einem Bejahen und  
Verstehen Gottes kommt, sofern das seelische Geschehen die Richtung  
auf Gott, die Bestimmtheit von Gott her empfängt, die Form des

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<sup>33</sup> When Barth ([1922] 1924:112-113) deals with Nietzsche's critique of Christianity, he says that Nietzsche as well as the other protesters against Christianity cannot provide a counter religion with the same anchor. To Barth to destroy temples are not better than building them. He calls Nietzsche a "Prediger des Todes" (Barth [1922] 1924:75-76).

Glaubens annimmt, geschieht das Unmögliche, das Wunder, das Paradox.

(Barth [1922] 1924:96)

If it is impossible for humans to know God, how then can God be known? Barth's polite answer to this is that God can only be known through God self. Therefore, in the act of revelation God remains God. He did not surrender himself to human beings. If he were to be fully known by human beings, he would not be God anymore. Barth says that his godly nature does not depend on his revelation. He is God before, during and after the act of revealing himself. But how is such a revelation possible? Barth ([1922] 1924:260) answers that we must see Jesus as the "Mittelbarkeiten" through which God revealed himself. We can know God only indirectly.

Barth (1947:338-339) would later explicitly state that God is free to reveal himself or not to do so. When God reveals himself in a form, it is important to remember that this form does not take God's place. It is God in the form that reveals, speaks, comforts, works and aids. Although God reveals himself, he stays the unknowable God (cf Barth [1924/25] 1990:18-20). It is clear that Barth wanted God to remain God, even in his act of revelation. But he realised that by treating the revelation only as "Mittelbarkeiten", that is to say in an indirect way, it could lead to the notion that the veil and the mediation function without any critical distance. Therefore, the deed of revelation had to be made more concrete. In *Der Römerbrief* (1922) he states that the resurrection of Jesus is *the* revelation. In this deed

Jesus becomes the Christ. Barth believed that the event of Jesus' resurrection was bodily, corporeal and personal. Revelation is always *in* history, but not *of* history (cf Landgraf 1994:14).<sup>34</sup> God revealed himself through his Word that became Scripture and Proclamation, from where he communicated with the human race, for example through nature and history. He adopted this idea from Calvin.

Calvin kennt keinen Stufenunterschied etwa zwischen natürlicher und übernatürlicher Offenbarung, keinen Weg, der von hier nach dort führte, sondern wenn er später tatsächlich beide unterscheidet, so ist die letztere doch eigentlich nur die *Explikation*, man könnte auch sagen: die *Aktualisierung* der ersteren, die Bibel z.B. die *Brille*, um das Wort Gottes in Natur und Geschichte zu lesen, wie er später ausdrücklich sagen wird.

(Barth 1993:217)

He stressed the fact that God made himself known in Christ. The god-forsakenness of Jesus on the cross was a negative experience, which God turned into a positive experience by lifting the veil that divided him from the human race. It is interesting to note that Barth concludes his contemplation of the resurrection with the statement that we can indeed know God. "Die kraft der Auferstehung aber ist die Erkenntnis dieses neuen Menschen, in der wir Gott erkennen, ja vielmehr von ihm erkannt werden (Gal. 4, 1 Cor. 8, 13). Die Gnade ist die

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<sup>34</sup> It was important for Barth, in his attempt to escape the historicism of Hegel, to clearly state this.

Kraft der Auferstehung” (Barth [1922] 1924:187). In Jesus’ death our own death becomes visible, and in his resurrection our new life in him becomes a probability (cf Fergusson 2003:69).

When we consider Barth’s understanding of revelation, it becomes obvious that his interpretation is coloured with trinitarian notions. It was only later that he would speak in a totally trinitarian manner about God. To him, God as Father reveals himself in his Son Jesus Christ through the power of his Holy Spirit. Barth’s ethical viewpoint was rooted in his christology. It is in the event of Christ’s death on the cross that humans realise their sinfulness and hopelessness. God was the only one who could bring the human race into a relationship with him. Without his grace and love, humans would be condemned and lost forever. For Barth this constitutes ethics. It is not about what we can do, but about realising what God has done for us. Barth ([1922] 1924:416-417) distinguishes between two ethical activities, namely “primäre ethische Handelns” and “sekundäre ethische Handelns”. Primary ethics are all those deeds of humans undertaken in carrying out the will of God, such as worshipping and sacrificing everything for God. “Opfer bedeutet Preisgabe, Verzichtleistung des Menschen zugunsten der Gottheit, bedingungslos gemachtes Geschenk” (Barth [1922] 1924:416). Secondary ethics are those actions, of which the evaluation takes place according to the will of God.

Wobei folgendes wohl zu beachten ist: Ein Opfer ist nicht etwa eine menschliche Handlung, in der sich der Wille Gottes vollstreckte in dem Sinn, daß der Opfernde durch sein Handeln ein Organ Gottes

würde. Ein Opfer ist vielmehr eine Demonstration zur Ehre Gottes, von Gott gefordert (denn Gott will geehrt sein), aber an sich eine menschliche Handlung so gut oder so schlecht wie irgendeine Andere. Gott bleibt allein Gott auch dem größten Opfer gegenüber, und sein Wille geht nach wie vor seinen eigenen Weg.

(Barth [1922] 1924:417)

It is noteworthy that *Der Römerbrief* (1922) contains a critique against religion, a theme also explored by Nietzsche in his book *Der Antichrist* (1888). Neither Barth nor Nietzsche criticised religion, *per se*, but every religion that seeks selfish goals (cf Landgraf 1994:48). Barth however also recognises positive qualities in religion. It teaches humans that they can never be God, for their own unrighteousness is exposed in every deed of human behaviour. It can never be a method of self-justification. It is merely a road sign, a way to enter into a relationship with God. When Barth speaks of the church, he regards it as the place of God's judgement. It is not to be understood in a negative way. God's judgement is an act through which he shows his grace towards humankind. Therefore, the church must be understood as the place where God shows us his grace, in the same way that he has done in the salvation of Jesus Christ. The church's main task is to proclaim this salvation to all humankind. When the church stops proclaiming the salvation of Christ, it stops being church. Should this happen, atheism is the result.

To Barth theology is an act of daring. Theology cannot be seen as a doctrine of the subject matter, which functions as a traditional handing down from generation to generation. Theology must always be an act of rethinking, reformulating and restating the truths about God and his relationship towards humankind (cf Barth 1924:158).<sup>35</sup> This is what Barth has in mind when he speaks of theology. Barth distinguishes between three ways of speaking about God, namely the dogmatic, the critical and the dialectical way (cf Barth 1924:166).

This can be done firstly by attributing dogmas, doctrines and characteristics to God. However, this method fails because it speaks *about* a God and not *of* God. The second way of speaking about God is by “negating humanity” (McCormack 1997:309). But this method is not effective, because it achieves only the negation of humanity. The dialectical way is the third way, which Barth sees as the best way to speak of God.

Daß Gott (aber wirklich Gott!) Mensch (aber wirklich Mensch!) wird, das ist da gleichmäßig gesehen als jenes Lebendige, als der entscheidende Inhalt eines wirklichen von Gott Redens. Wie aber soll nun die notwendige Beziehung von beiden Seiten auf diese lebendige Mitte hergestellt werden? Der echte Dialektiker weiß, daß diese Mitte unfaßlich und unanschaulich ist, er wird sich also möglichst selten zu direkten Mitteilungen darüber hinreißen lassen, wissend, daß alle direkten Mitteilungen darüber, ob sie nun positiv oder negativ seien,

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<sup>35</sup> This line of thinking can also be found in Peters’ theology, which will be dealt with later in this chapter.

nicht Mitteilungen darüber, sondern eben immer entweder Dogmatik oder Kritik sind. Auf diesem schmalen Felsengrat kann man nur gehen, nicht stehen, sonst fällt man herunter, entweder zur Rechten oder zur Linken, aber sicher herunter....Ja am Nein zu verdeutlichen und Nein am Ja, ohne länger als einem Moment in einem starren Ja oder Nein zu verharren....

(Barth 1924:171-172)

Barth's aim with theology was to speak about God as if God himself spoke (*Deus dixit*) (cf Barth [1924] 1985:68-75). It is in this regard that we find the different meanings Barth attributed to the Word of God. He distinguished between three meanings, namely the revealed Word of God, Jesus Christ; the spoken Word of God, as we find it in Scripture; and the *kerygmatic* Word of God, as it is preached (cf Barth [1924] 1985:18-19). We can also call it the Word in eternal, historical and present form.

These thoughts enabled Barth to speak of the Christ event as the subject of the *Deus dixit* (cf Barth [1924] 1985:18) in history, which must be proclaimed continuously. Barth saw the true nature of God in the revelation event. It is after God has revealed himself in Christ, that it becomes clear who he really is. Therefore, all reflections on the revelation of God must be of a posterior nature (cf Barth [1924] 1985:185-186). The revelation becomes visible in the process of God's incarnation (cf Barth [1924] 1985:189-190). The Son becomes human, but not identical to the human flesh. Barth did not agree with the



old concept of God having elected people long before time. He did not want to divide people into two classes. He did not see this election by God as static. It can change according to the situation. It vests totally with God to decide what he wants to do in each and every situation. There cannot be any certainties for human beings in the deed of election. The only thing that is certain is that God elects. Barth came to a new understanding of God's judgement and election, after having contemplated God's love and grace (cf Barth 1940:266). God elects everyone who accepts his revelation in Christ.

Barth wrote a book with the title *Fides quaerens intellectum* (1931), referring to Anselm's definition of theology. Anselm wanted to prove the existence of God by means of a certain method. The method Anselm used, greatly coincided with Barth's own thinking about God. According to Anselm, knowledge of God begins with faith (cf Barth 1982:131). It is through prayer that we gain faith. And in every moment of faith we come to realise who God really is. Hence this faith leads to knowledge of God (*Credo ut intelligam*). Therefore, the theologian cannot know God without faith. And even if he or she has faith, they must wait for God to reveal himself, as he has done in Jesus Christ.

Erkenntnis heißt hier prinzipiell *An*-Erkenntnis. Denken heißt *Nach*-Denken, cogitare kommt von dem cogere der göttlichen Offenbarung. Der Geist Jesu Christi, der in seiner Kirche ist, hat und ist das christliche Wissen. Und nun handelt es sich darum, daß der menschliche Geist dem sich als Subjekt zeigenden göttlichen Geist

gehorche und gelassen sei. Wort Gottes ist eben die Position Gottes in der Vernunft.

(Barth 1982:136)

There were important goals in Barth's theological agenda. The most important one was his ultimate aim, namely to state that God is God – that he exists. To be able to state it explicitly, he adopted the principle of infinite qualitative difference. Through this principle Barth stated the difference between God and humankind, the total otherness of God in comparison to humankind, and the infinite God in opposition to the finiteness of humankind (Barth 1947:321).

But God bridged this gap between him and human beings by revealing himself (cf Barth 1947:338). Barth emphasised the importance of understanding the revelation of God as his self-revelation, as a self-offering and self-manifestation – as a mystery. God is always a mystery (see Barth 1947:339). God decided to reveal himself to humankind. He did not have to do it. He deliberately decided to come to the humans. This does not mean that God surrendered his existence. He is God and can reveal himself without giving himself, his existence, away. He is the almighty and is sovereign in his decisions. Revealing himself is his and only his prerogative. And that is what the revelation of God means. Otherwise it would not have been revelation, but rather the exposed God as a possession of humankind. God veils himself as the unveiling God to human beings through his Word.

Es bedarf der Offenbarung selbst zu der Erkenntnis, daß Gott verborgen und der Mensch blind ist. Die Offenbarung und nur sie rückt Gott und Mensch wirklich und endgültig auseinander, indem sie sie zusammenbringt. Denn indem sie sie zusammenbringt, sagt sie dem Menschen Bescheid über Gott und über sich selbst, offenbart sie Gott als den Herrn von Ewigkeit, als Schöpfer, Versöhner und Erlöser und qualifiziert sie den Menschen als Geschöpf, als Sünder, als Todgeweihten.

(Barth 1938:32)

God speaks to humankind through his Word in three different ways, namely:

- as the *kerygmatic* Word in sermons (Barth 1947:89-101);
- as the spoken/written Word in Scripture (Barth 1947:101-113);
- as the revealed Word in Jesus Christ (Barth 1947:114-124).

But the Word of God is not a static, historical event of the past, upon which we can merely reflect by looking back. His Word is an everyday reality for humans where or when they accept it in faith (see Barth 1947:136). The Word of God means that God speaks. This speaking of God is true and known in and through the event that he himself says it, that he is present in person in and with what is said by him (Barth 1947:141).

*Deus dixit* does not imply that God must speak to humans. He is free to speak to us when and wherever and however he wants to. God's actions must be understood in the sense of his compassion and love. He decided to speak to us in our world, in all the forms that Barth mentions. This, the notion of the *Deus dixit*, is a very important key for understanding Barth's doctrine of the Trinity. He sees the triune God as one God with three modes of being. Barth does not want to speak of persons in the Trinity. Barth (1947:379-381) prefers to speak of the "drei Seinsweisen Gottes". Jesus is the reality of the revelation of God. Jesus is the one who has come and is yet to come again. This reality is the fulfilment of time. On the question of what Scripture says of Jesus, Barth says that Scripture does not say the same as the christological dogma that the Christian church confesses. The christological dogma and the doctrine of the Trinity are not explicitly found in Scripture. Barth says that we must interpret the dogmas of the Trinity and of Jesus as a commentary on the church's understanding of Scripture. We can also say that the revelation of God leads to the doctrine of the Trinity.

To Barth God is the eschatological God, the new creator of the new world without sin and suffering. In this God lies the future of humankind. This is atheism's biggest challenge.

#### **4.2.3 Reflecting on the challenges that Barth offered to modern atheism and theism**

Barth was trying to recover the concept of God in the light of modern atheism and theism. He agreed with Nietzsche that the god of their time, the god of history and progress, was an idol. He was a "Nicht-Gott". Barth's aim was to free God from the views of the modern period – by saying that God could not be a prisoner of the human race. He

wanted God to be God again. But to say that Barth would agree with all of Nietzsche's views would be a misconception. And the opposite is also true. If Nietzsche could have read Barth, he would have appreciated Barth's attempts at saving the concept of God, but would also criticise Barth's methods of thinking anew of God. In the thinking of Nietzsche this would again produce idols. But we must credit Barth for the attempt that he made to answer to the challenges of Nietzsche's prophecy about the death of God.

Wir können, auch indem wir jetzt fragen: Was ist Gott? sein göttliches und also ihn als Gott Unterscheidendes? nur noch einmal fragen: Wer ist Gott? Denn er hat, was er ist, nicht nur in sich, an sich, bei sich, sondern indem Er ist, ist Alles, was er ist. Es gibt genau genommen kein gottheitliches Prädikat, keinen Gottesbegriff, der im besonderen das zum Inhalt haben könnte, was Gott ist, es gibt genau genommen nur das göttlichen Subjekt als solches und in ihm die Fülle seines gottheitlichen Prädikates.

(Barth 1940:337)

To Barth it was important that God as the unknowable must become knowable to the human race. It can only happen when humans have an idea of God's revelation, presence and reality. He is the wholly other who decided to reveal himself to humankind in Jesus Christ. He lifted the veil that divided him from the human race. In Jesus' resurrection he became the knowable God. Faith leads to knowledge of God (*Credo ut intelligam*).

Barth believed in the eschatological God who would create a new world. Human beings must realise that this world will make way for a new world without pain, suffering and sin.

#### **4.2.4 Summary**

To Barth God can never be tied to any human encounter or history. God is the wholly other, who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. To him, the kingdom of God appeared in Jesus Christ. It was important for him to stress the fact that God is a mystery, even in his act of revelation. But he stressed the importance of Scripture as the first principle of God's revelation, like the Reformers did. In the light of God's love, Barth came to a new understanding of God's judgement and election. God elects everyone who accepts his revelation in Christ. To Barth God spoke (*Deus dixit*) to humankind through his Word in three different ways, namely through the proclaimed Word in sermons, through the spoken Word in Scripture and through the revealed Word in Jesus Christ. To him this God is also the *God of the future*, the creator of the new world without sin and suffering.

### **4.3 JÜRGEN MOLTSMANN'S CHALLENGE TO ATHEISM AND THEISM**

#### **4.3.1 Introduction**

Moltmann in his book, *In der Geschichte des dreieinigen Gottes: Beiträge zur trinitarischen Theologie* (1991b:222), makes mention of the fact that he came from a liberal Protestant home where he knew more about Nietzsche, Lessing and Goethe, than he did of the Bible (cf Moltmann 1995:14). According to Moltmann (1999:28) Nietzsche's book *Der Antichrist* (1888) can teach Christians much about true Christianity. He agrees that

Nietzsche did not mean that God, *per se*, was dead. He says that Nietzsche was focusing on those who were responsible for the killing, us, and not on the victim, in this case, God.<sup>36</sup>

“God is dead – we have killed him”, Nietzsche maintained. Unfortunately he did not say *when* we kill God. We kill God when we make God’s image the victim of our violence, for God is in God’s image. We kill God when we shut out and drive away strangers, for God is in the stranger. We kill God when we choose death instead of life and secure our own lives at the price of the death of many other living things, for God is the living God. Anyone who infringes life infringes God. Anyone who does not love life does not love God. God is a God of the whole of life, of every life and of the shared life of us all.

(Moltmann 1998:18)

He agrees with Nietzsche as far as the consequences of the death of God are concerned (Moltmann 1998:14). He calls it a terrible loss of the assurance of God and the self. He

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<sup>36</sup> In a footnote in his book *Theologie der Hoffnung* Moltmann (1965:152-155) explains the origin and meaning of the expression: “Gott ist tot” and also compares the different interpretations of the different philosophers. He interprets Nietzsche’s “Gott ist tot” in this footnote as a critique of modern culture and on page 243 as a protest against historicism in the name of life. He also quotes Nietzsche in a footnote of his book *Der gekreuzigte Gott: Das Kreuz Christi als Grund und Kritik christlicher Theologie* ([1972] 1976:274) saying: “Kurz gesagt, man hätte im Grunde genommen niemals damit aufgehört, Gott zu töten, und der Schrei Nietzsches: ‘Gott ist tot, und wir haben ihn getötet!’ müßte in jeder Generation von neuem aufgegriffen werden....Wer kann diesen Gott töten, den der Mensch zur Welt bringt, und wer kann ihn so entscheidend töten, daß er nicht wieder aufersteht?”

is convinced that the consequences thereof could be experienced in events of World War I and II (Moltmann 1995:20-22; 1998:14). Moltmann agrees that what Nietzsche meant by his statement is that the god of progress is dead, because hope in the nineteenth century was associated with history and history with the future (Moltmann 1989:249; 250). Progress was a given fact, which was taken for granted in all the movements of science and culture (Moltmann 1995:19-30). World War I and II shattered all hopes of this secular faith in progress. Moltmann (1999:138) says that Germany also had a “Wille zur Macht” like that of Nietzsche’s, but the German “Wille zur Macht” ended up in World War I and II, in Verdun, Stalingrad and Auschwitz. Instead of the secular faith in progress, the world felt that it was coming to an abrupt end. Moltmann (1988:31) sees the task of theology to formulate liberating hope without giving way to ideas such as belief in progress or apocalyptic anxiety about the future.

Moltmann argues that the idea of progress started two hundred years ago with the French Revolution. The people of France decided they wanted change. And when they eventually succeeded, the whole world looked at them in amazement – especially the Germans. Germany responded to the political revolution in France by an intellectual one (cf Moltmann 1995:20). Kant, with his transcendental philosophy of subjectivity, started the intellectual revolution in Germany. Kant, Fichte and Hegel are the philosophers of German idealism, which can be interpreted as the German theory of the French Revolution. The impact it had on the world was just as powerful as the French Revolution (Moltmann, in Metz & Moltmann 1995:160). This leads to the inevitable conclusion that a human being can write his or her own history. But as Moltmann says,



this human being can then also become the victim thereof. Moltmann (in Metz & Moltmann 1995:161) argues that all the great thinkers in the nineteenth century thought in the paradigm of history. To him history is just another word for crisis, which to him is just another word for revolution.<sup>37</sup>

Moltmann therefore reinterprets Nietzsche's statement "Gott ist tot [sic]" christologically. The suffering of Christ is the suffering of God himself (Moltmann 1991b:74). This he does after two World Wars, and in an attempt to give hope to humankind after all hope for progress was shattered (cf Moltmann 1988:87). Moltmann reinterprets this statement of Nietzsche's christologically by anchoring it in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Moltmann (1980:52-53; cf Moltmann 1965:155), in this regard, closely links up with Hegel. Hegel approached the statement "Gott ist tot [sic]" philosophically, to draw humankind's attention to the nothingness without God.<sup>38</sup> He does so by giving Good Friday a deeper meaning. The historical Good Friday is not just a representation of the god-forsakenness of Jesus Christ. It is also a representation of the god-forsakenness of everything that exists (cf Moltmann 1965:153). When the modern world, which rebels against an autocratic theistic God, stands before the reality of the shadow cast over Good Friday by the omnipresent nothingness, it becomes a theological necessity to see this world as part of a process of God's revelation on the cross, and to see

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<sup>37</sup> Moltmann (1965:216-217) uses Nietzsche as an example of someone who tried to solve the crisis of history in the second half of the nineteenth century.

<sup>38</sup> Moltmann (1980:29; 1985:141) describes the feeling of humans in the infinite reality of space as the feeling Nietzsche experienced with the death of God and the loss in orientation, when Nietzsche said in *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1973:159): "Wohin bewegt sie sich nun? Wohin bewegen wir uns? Fort von allen Sonnen? Stürzen wir nicht fortwährend? Und rückwärts, seitwärts, vorwärts, nach allen Seiten? Gibt es noch ein Oben und ein Unten? Irren wir nicht wie durch ein unendliches Nichts?"

the resurrection as a reality. For Hegel the resurrection and the future of God must manifest themselves not only in the case of the god-forsakenness of the crucified Jesus, but also in that of the god-forsakenness of the world (cf Moltmann 1965:153).

#### **4.3.2 Atheism and theism challenged**

Moltmann believes Christians today face a new problem – that of uncertainty. Many Christians feel uncertain about God and their faith in him. They are divided between the debates of the existence and non-existence of God. And many Christians experience pain and suffering. They ask themselves time and again: who is this God who allows us to suffer? According to Moltmann this question can only be answered after having contemplated Jesus' suffering. The full meaning of God's love for those who suffer and feel abandoned in the world can only be understood in the light of what really happened between the dying Jesus and *his* God (Moltmann, in Metz & Moltmann 1995:90). He argues that we can see it in the cry of Jesus on the cross (Mk 15:34): "Mein Gott, mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen?" Jesus knew the meaning of rejection. On the cross God his Father abandoned him. What happened there, happened between Jesus and his God or better still between God and God (Moltmann 1970:145; Moltmann, in Metz & Moltmann 1995:92). "Wenn dieser Gottverlassene, wie der Osterglaube bezeugt, von Gott auferweckt wurde, dann entsteht für die christliche Theologie ein Prozeß zwischen Gott und Gott, zwischen dem gekreuzigten Gott und dem kommenden Gott, zwischen dem verlassenden Gott und dem annehmenden Gott, zwischen der Erfahrung des vernichtenden Nichts und der Hoffnung auf den Schöpfer aus Nichts" (Moltmann 1970:138). Christology is the basis of all theology. The essence of christology lies in the

cross of Christ. Moltmann (1977:68) says that the cross of Christ is the beginning of a theology that is specifically Christian. The history of Jesus ended with his death on the cross but eschatologically seen, that is where it starts. Moltmann (1977:61) quotes Nietzsche as saying that modern man lost the meaning that was inherent in the paradox of “Gott am Kreuz”. To Nietzsche it was a loss, because it promised an “Umwertung aller antiken Werte” (Nietzsche, in Moltmann 1977:70).

The only hope for humankind thus lies in the crucified and resurrected God. “Durch die Kunde von der Auferstehung des gekreuzigten Christus und in der Erfahrung seiner Geistesgegenwart kommt die Hoffnung auf universale Antwort in diesen Schrei nach Gott und damit auch die Hoffnung in die Welt, dass [sic] nicht die Tränen das Letzte sind” (Moltmann 1989:234; see Moltmann 1970:72). The God in the statement “Gott ist todt [sic]!” is also the crucified and resurrected God whom we know from history as the God of the promise in which we can hope and trust. “Das Kreuz Christi ist das Kreuz des von Gott auferweckten und zu Gott erhöhten Herrn” (Moltmann 1989:235). Moltmann (1995:156) admits that progress and hope exist in history, but says that God cannot be deduced from it. He adds that “[d]ie Offenbarung Gottes, von der das Neue Testament spricht, wenn es von der Offenbarung des gekreuzigten und auferweckten Christus kündigt, ist keine historische Offenbarung Gottes *in* der Geschichte, die eschatologische Offenbarung Gottes ist vielmehr das >>Ende der Geschichte<<” (Moltmann 1995:156). When one thinks of *God in history*, it always leads to atheism or theism, while in the case of the converse, *history in God*, one is led past the dilemmas of atheism and theism. History in God means to understand all of humanity with its pain, misery and suffering in

the suffering and dying of Christ (Moltmann [1972] 1976:233). This view of Moltmann's closely links with Berdyaev's philosophy of history, as we find it in Moltmann's book *Trinität und Reich Gottes: zur Gotteslehre* (1980). The issue against which Nietzsche rebelled, namely a theistic uninvolved god, does not exist any more. The history in God proves it. As Father, God suffered *with his Son*, and also suffered the *loss of his Son* (see Moltmann 1980:97). Jesus' death is not the death of God but the beginning of his life-giving Spirit of love, which appears from the sorrow of the Father and the death of Jesus (Moltmann [1972] 1976:239). The grief of the Father, the suffering of the Son and the living hope of the Holy Spirit were part of Auschwitz.

History repeated itself in God because God again had to bear suffering and grief because of the atrocities of Auschwitz (cf Moltmann 1991a:96-99; see Moltmann 1975b:80). The life of God within the Trinity cannot be seen as a closed circle (Moltmann 1975b:71-72). In comparison to Barth's "monarchische Trinitätslehre" (so described by Moltmann), Moltmann (1991b:179-182) subscribes to, what he calls a "soziale Trinitätslehre". To him Barth's doctrine of the Trinity does not give expression to the loving relationship between God the Father who loves the Son and the Son, who prays to the Father and the Holy Spirit. For this very reason Moltmann constructs his whole theology around this movement inside the triune God. He describes creation as an act of God the Father that sends forth the Son and the Holy Spirit, where the Son redeems the world of its sins and the Holy Spirit gives life to the world and allows it to be part in God's eternal life (Moltmann 1985:109). Moltmann (1991b:180-181; see Moltmann 1999:277-283) says that the term *perichoresis* best describes the unity of the triune God. "Es folgt aus dem

Ansatz der perichoretischen Trinitätslehre, daß nicht die innertrinitarische Konstitutionsebene, sondern die innertrinitarische Beziehungsebene der *Perichoresis* und der Mutualität für das Schöpfungsverhältnis Gottes und alle gottentsprechenden Verhältnisse in der Schöpfung maßgeblich wird” (Moltmann 1991b:180-181). In a footnote Moltmann (1991b:181) quotes Nietzsche’s disagreement with the concept of mutuality. To Nietzsche “Gegenseitigkeit” is a “große Gemeinheit” which was a concept of early Christianity. Moltmann concedes that Nietzsche has a point in this regard, all be it in a cynical way. Moltmann (1991c:323-324) therefore does not interpret *perichoresis* according to Nietzsche’s understanding thereof.

The triune God is also involved with his church on earth. People are included into the history of the Trinity through the experience of the life-giving Spirit in faith, in baptism, and in the fellowship of believers (Moltmann 1980:106). The church to Moltmann’s mind is the church which Jesus proclaimed. “Die Kirche Jesu Christi ist die eine, heilige, katholische und apostolische Kirche. Einheit in Freiheit, Heiligkeit in Armut, Katholizität in Parteinahme für die Schwachen und Apostolat im Leiden sind ihre Kennzeichen in der Welt” (Moltmann 1975b:388).

After the horror of two World Wars, Moltmann gives people hope by reassuring them that God’s presence is not outside the world, but in the world. And he is not just God, he is also human, not just autocratic and cruel, but also the victim of suffering and love. Not only is he God with us and for us, but we are also united with God through his suffering and death (cf Moltmann 1988:202). Not only is God the crucified, he is also the

resurrected Lord who ensured our future forever with God. “Das Kreuz Christi steht in dieser Weltzeit von Gewalttat und Sünde – der Auferstandene lebt in der kommenden Weltzeit der neuen Schöpfung in Gerechtigkeit” (Moltmann 1989:236).

Our hope lies not only in the crucified and resurrected Lord, but also in the expectation of the coming Lord, when he will return in glory to judge the living and the dead and to take those with him who believe in him. Our hope thus lies in the past (crucifixion), in the present (resurrection) and in the future (*parousia*) by the crucified, risen and coming God. In this coming expectation that has already started with the resurrection of Christ, our hope and eternal future are ensured. “Aus der Auferstehung Christi entfaltet die Freude kosmische und eschatologische Perspektiven auf die Erlösung des ganzen Kosmos. Eine Erlösung wozu? Im Fest der Ewigen Freude sollen alle Geschöpfe und die ganze Schöpfungsgemeinschaft Gott ihre Hymnen und Lobgesänge singen” (Moltmann 1995:367).

Moltmann (1965:74) maintains that the only way of challenging modern atheism and the philosophy of Hegel is through a theology of the resurrection, in terms of an eschatology of the resurrection in the sense of the future of the crucified Lord. “Eine solche Theologie muß das ‘Kreuz der Gegenwart’ (Hegel), ihre Gottlosigkeit und Gottverlassenheit, annehmen und daran den ‘Geist der Auferstehung’ theoretisch und praktisch beweisen” (Moltmann 1965:74). Then revelation would not prove or manifest itself as history of our present society, but would reveal to this society and this age the eschatological process of history. Whenever the reality of the resurrection is defined in

historical or existentialist or utopian terms, then the origin of this reality lies in the atheistic form of the historian's view of history, of people's view about themselves and of their utopian view of the future. We must therefore think of *God* as the God of the resurrection, as the God of the future (Moltmann 1965:152).

### **4.3.3 Reflecting on the challenges that Moltmann offered to modern atheism and theism**

Moltmann (1988:235) avoids patripassianism by saying that Christ died in God. He balances the death of God and the death of Christ (see Moltmann 1970:138; 1977:80). But we must remember that he does this only when he speaks of Jesus' crucifixion (see Moltmann, in Metz & Moltmann 1995:96). He constructs his whole Trinitarian theology consistently around the risen, crucified, coming Christ who proceeds from the Father and who is, through the Spirit, the hope of a new creation and who is for ever with God in absolute peace, joy and glory. To Moltmann (in Metz & Moltmann 1995:96) the death of Jesus is not an incident between God and humankind, but an event within the triune God between Jesus and his Father, an event from which God's Holy Spirit goes out to the world (see Moltmann 1991b:182-184).

Küng and Pannenberg do not agree. Küng (1993:117) says that we need to be cautious when speaking of the death of God or the suffering God, because those are mere speculations, not inspired by the Bible, but by Hegel. Pannenberg says that we must see Jesus' suffering and death in the light of his human nature.

Dennoch kann es nicht anders sein, als daß Jesus in der Person, also in der Person des ewigen Sohnes durch das Leiden und Sterben am Kreuz betroffen wurde, freilich so, daß Jesus in seiner äußersten Erniedrigung und in der Annahme dieses Sterbens die äußerste Konsequenz seiner Selbstunterscheidung vom Vater auf sich nahm und sich gerade darin als der Sohn des Vaters bewährte. Auch der Vater kann nicht als unberührt vom Leiden seines Sohnes gedacht werden, wenn gelten soll, daß Gott Liebe ist.

(Pannenberg 1988b:341-342)

In Küng's (1993:119-121) opinion the whole New Testament stands witness to the fact that it was not God himself as Father who hung on the cross, but God's Image, Word and Son. He says that Paul in particular speaks of Christ who was crucified in weakness, and not of God. Through his resurrection Christ became part of the triune God through whom we acquired eternal life.

Ja, nur so, durch die Aufnahme dieses Sohnes in Gottes ewiges Leben, erweist sich Gott für die Glaubenden als der diesem einzigartigen Sohn (und damit allen seinen Söhnen und Töchtern) sogar in äußerstem Leid, in Verlassenheit und Sterben solidarisch nahe: als der auch mit unserem Schmerz verbundene und an unserem Leid (verschuldetem oder unverschuldetem) teilhabende, als der von



unserem Elend und all der Ungerechtigkeit mitbetroffene, verborgen mit-leidende und doch gerade so zuguterletzt unendlich gütige und mächtige Gott.

(Küng 1993:121)

Moltmann was convinced that God could never be tied to any progress in history. The god of progress as a creation of humankind according to both Nietzsche and Moltmann, is indeed *dead*. The only God that exists is the coming triune God of the future. God as the triune God, who is transcendent as the Father and immanent as the Son and the Spirit in history, reveals the future. When we understand God as revealing the future, we will comprehend our history of pain, suffering and hope as the history of God. To Moltmann (in Metz & Moltmann 1995:98) the history of life and the future of God go beyond atheistic objection and theistic acceptance. “In dem modernen Streit zwischen dem Theismus, der behauptet: Gott ist, und dem Atheismus, der behauptet: Gott ist nicht, kann eschatologische Theologie sagen: Gottes sein, das Reich seiner vollen Identität, ist im Kommen” (Moltmann 1970:155).

The future awaits everyone who has faith in God. “Faith finds the consolation of God in all suffering, but hope looks to the future of a new creation in which there will be no more mourning, crying, or pain. To put it simply: anyone who believes in God hopes for this earth and does not despair. He looks beyond the horizon of apocalyptic terrors to

God's new world, and what he does will be attuned to that world" (Moltmann, in Metz & Moltmann 1995:170).

#### **4.3.4 Summary**

Moltmann agrees with Nietzsche that the concept of God in the nineteenth century, as the god who is associated with progress in history, is wrong. That god is dead. He offers a solution to this problem (God being associated with the progress in history) by stating that we can never talk of *God in history*. He postulates that talking of God in history, inevitably leads to atheism or theism. He prefers to talk of the *history in God*. He describes creation as an act of God the Father, who sends forth the Son and the Holy Spirit – the Son to redeem the world of its sins and the Holy Spirit to give us the hope and faith of the new creation. To him, God is the triune God of the future. His whole theology is an attempt to tell the people who suffered in World War I and II that God knows suffering. The *history in God* tells us that God the Father grieved the loss of his Son, while the Son suffered on the cross the grievance of god-forsakenness. For this reason, God understands the suffering of his children. The only hope that we have is the hope of God's future.

## **4.4 WOLFHART PANNENBERG'S CHALLENGE TO ATHEISM AND THEISM**

### **4.4.1 Introduction**

For the purpose of this chapter, I shall, as far as Pannenberg is concerned, focus primarily on the question of atheism and his view on how to challenge it. Pannenberg (1988b:73-

83) says one of the greatest problems of Christian belief in God is to relate the concept of God to nature, history and the world (present reality). What is even more difficult to explain is that the world is dependent on God.

Pannenberg (1972:202) agrees that Nietzsche was a prophet of his time and that his critique must be viewed as a reaction against the concept of God that was prevalent in his time. “Nietzsches bekanntes Wort ‘Gott ist tot’ hat zunächst diesen Sinn, daß der überlieferte Gottesgedanke des metaphysischen Weltbildes unglaubwürdig geworden ist” (Pannenberg 1975:72).<sup>39</sup>

Pannenberg therefore wants to offer a response to the question Nietzsche posed regarding the concept of God. To him (Pannenberg 1988b:73-83) the concept of God is very important. It cannot be exchanged for other concepts. But the concept of God always needs interpretation.

#### **4.4.2 Atheism and theism challenged**

In order to understand the theology of Pannenberg, a few parameters have to be taken into consideration. There is the influence of Barth, who was his professor at the University of Basel in 1950. At the same time Pannenberg was also strongly influenced by the great philosopher Hegel. His theology has often been called a “theology of reason”, as the title of Van Huyssteen’s book (1970) suggests. This becomes evident when Pannenberg (in Peters, T 1998:24-25) refers to theology as the science of God.

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<sup>39</sup> Pannenberg (1996:316-325) provides a brief description of the philosophy and the meaning of Nietzsche’s statement: “Gott ist todt [sic]!”

Pannenberg, although influenced by many other great thinkers, made theology his own enterprise. He agrees with Barth that God has revealed himself in Jesus Christ. He postulates that revelation is only revelation because it is the self-revelation of God (cf McCormack 1997:359, note; see Price 2002:99). It comes from God and is the only ground for human beings to talk of God. He agrees with Barth that the revelation in Jesus Christ is a unique revelation. In any theological enterprise this centeredness on the work and person of Jesus must be taken into account. Jesus' divinity and the universal validity of his mission are closely related.<sup>40</sup>

Pannenberg also differs from Barth. Barth thought that this revelation of God comes to humankind in a veiled form. This revelation of God is by God's grace and freedom. It enters the human world on the grounds of God's will and grace. Humans, as finite beings, cannot fully grasp or understand this reality. Calvin (1931:293-317) said that the finite is not capable of the infinite. Pannenberg disagrees. He says that for humankind to understand the revelation of God, revelation cannot lie outside human reality or existence. If human beings cannot understand this revelation and make it their own, it cannot be revelation. Pannenberg placed greater emphasis on the philosophical and historical-critical understanding of reality than Barth did. For Pannenberg God revealed himself indirectly in history.

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<sup>40</sup> Pannenberg (1976:242) is of the opinion that the most far-reaching denial of Jesus' universal validity was by Nietzsche in his book *Der Antichrist* (1888). Nietzsche denied the man Jesus as the point of orientation for Christian piety. This piety focused on sin as a condition of faith in redemption. In the end it led to spiritual suffering and oppression, which made human beings break with the source of their guilt feelings namely Christianity. Pannenberg (1988b:75, 117, 168; 1991:267) uses Nietzsche as an example. He mentions that Nietzsche viewed Christian morality as life denying (Pannenberg 1991:270). He says that it is incorrect to talk of the death of God on the cross, since it has been done from Hegel's and Nietzsche's time. To him Jesus died according to his human and not his divine nature (Pannenberg 1988b:341).

The influence of Hegel can be seen throughout Pannenberg's books and articles. Perhaps this is why so many believe that his theology is a mere re-statement of the philosophy of Hegel. This is however not true. Pannenberg used the philosophy of Hegel to form his own theology. He agrees with Hegel that the revelation of God is universal history, but he differs from Hegel as far as the concept of the "absolute Geist", which definitely or necessarily reveals itself in history, is concerned. For Pannenberg there is no absolute idea in the present. Everything within history is provisional. God reveals himself indirectly in history whenever he wills to do it.

According to Pannenberg (1988b:244-245) Hegel had also influenced Barth. We must understand the revelation of God in the strict sense that Barth does. God reveals himself to humankind through his Word in three different ways, namely as the *kerygmatic* Word in sermons, as the spoken or written Word in Scripture and as the revealed Word in Jesus Christ. However, it needs to be stressed that the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is a unique one. Pannenberg (1988b:280-281) says that this revelation happens through his Word, as long as his Word is the same as his divine nature.

Pannenberg believes it is better to talk of the revelation of God through history in an indirect way. It is only through history that God reveals himself – indirectly (see Pannenberg 1982:16-20). History is the indirect self-disclosure of God. Therefore history, the history of God, lies open to us, because it is only at the end, in future, that we will understand our present and our past.

In diesem besonderen Sinne kann von der antizipatorischen Offenbarung der in der Zukunft des Reiches Gottes vor aller Augen offenbart werdenden Gottheit Gottes in Person und Geschichte Jesu gesprochen werden. Diese Aussage geht über das neutestamentliche “Revelationsschema” insofern hinaus, als dort “nur” von der Offenbarung des göttlichen Heilsplans in Jesus Christus die Rede ist.

(Pannenberg 1988b:270-271)

Pannenberg (1988b:244-245; cf Pannenberg 1982:18) states that the idea of the indirect self-revelation of God through history has its source in German idealism with Hegel as the great exponent.

History, for Pannenberg (1975:24), is reality.<sup>41</sup> The biblical idea of history lies in the reporting of the events in a chronological form. The early Christian writers adopted this concept of history. In modern times, humanity replaced God as the sole author of history. But it was soon realised that the unity of history lies with God. “Und damit droht das Geschichtsbewußtsein zu schwinden. So ist also das Verständnis der Wirklichkeit als Geschichte nicht nur aus dem biblischen Gottesgedanken erwachsen, sondern es bleibt auch *gebunden* an den biblischen Gottesglauben, dessen Ausdruck es ist” (Pannenberg 1975:27).

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<sup>41</sup> Pannenberg confirmed this statement at a seminar held on 5 October 1999 (which I attended) at the University of California at Berkeley, USA, which was hosted by the Centre for Theology and the Natural Sciences.

According to Pannenberg Rahner has sharpened the understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity on the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Rahner stated that the immanent Trinity is also the economic Trinity (“Rahner’s rule”). It means that God’s act in history is the same as it is in eternity. This does not mean that they absorb each other. Pannenberg sees the resurrection of Christ as a historical event – an event that actually took place in history. In this historical fact God shows us the meaning of creating the heaven and the earth out of nothing. God has shown us his love through this event. When he talks of life and the Christian concept of the evolution of life, he sees it as the process which began with the divine Spirit that brought the creatures of God into life as a dynamic activity. This creativity was first recognised in the resurrection of Jesus (Pannenberg 1991:120; Pannenberg, in Peters, T 1998:145). The resurrection becomes our hope for the future, when Jesus will again make the old new. “Durch die Auferweckung Jesu ist der Gott Israels als der über alles Geschehen mächtige Gott offenbart; denn wer das Ende aller Dinge in der Hand hält, der ist auch ihrer selbst mächtig. Vom Ende der Auferstehung her ist er als der Gott auch des Anfangs offenbart, als der, der ‘die Toten lebendig macht und das, was nicht ist, ins Dasein ruft’ (Röm 4, 17)” (Pannenberg 1975:81). He extensively deals with this theme in his book *Theologie und Reich Gottes* (1971). Pannenberg (1971:9-29) does not use this as an escape from the critical claims of the atheists.

In his book *Gottesgedanke und menschliche Freiheit* (1972), Pannenberg deals with the criticism of the atheists. They claim that belief in God deprives them of their human freedom. Pannenberg gives them credit for helping us define the very reality of God: to

think about God as a non-existent being. But how would that be possible? According to Pannenberg (1972:47) the alternative lies in the future. The idea of God as future derives from his understanding of Jesus' message of the coming kingdom of God. "In Jesu Botschaft wurde die eschatologische Hoffnung zur einzigen Quelle für die Erkenntnis des Gotteswillens und daher auch zur einzigen Anweisung für das Leben der Menschen" (Pannenberg 1971:12). For him this is the only legitimate way of speaking of God (cf Van Huyssteen 1970:71). He states that it gives concreteness to the word *God*. "Wenn wir in der so angedeuteten Weise Gott als die Macht der Zukunft verstehen, gewinnt das Wort Gott eine neue Konkretheit. Wenn von der Macht der Zukunft die Rede ist, sollte man nicht an den leeren Formalbegriff der Zukunft als Zeitmodus im Gegensatz zu Vergangenheit und Gegenwart denken" (Pannenberg 1971:14).

#### **4.4.3 Reflecting on the challenges that Pannenberg offered to modern atheism and theism**

Pannenberg changed the paradigm of Hegel in the sense that God reveals himself indirectly in history, but when he wills. God is not a prisoner of history or the process of history. He changed history in Jesus Christ when he made a new future possible. It is in the future of God that we as human beings understand our infinite position. In Jesus' life and death we become part of God's future, which already appeared in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. In this coming of God lies our hope and future.<sup>42</sup> "Die Trinitätslehre beschreibt den kommenden Gott als den Gott der Liebe, dessen Zukunft schon angekommen ist, und der die vergangene und gegenwärtige Welt durch sich selbst



integriert und so verwandelnd bejaht zur Teilhabe an seinem eigenen unsterblichen Leben” (Pannenberg 1971:29).

To Pannenberg (1979:359) the transcendence of the hidden God, as a characteristic of modern atheism, puts atheism in question. It comes to the fore in the form of the negation of the traditional concept of God. How to think of the alternative of God without this concept or depiction, remains an open question. “Daß die ‘leere Transzendenz’ als Person, als Gott begegnet, das vollzieht sich in der Geschichte der Religionen; und deren Wahrheit zu prüfen, bleibt der Untersuchung der besonderen Gestalt der einzelnen Religionen vorbehalten” (Pannenberg 1979:360).

#### **4.4.4 Summary**

Pannenberg agrees with Nietzsche that the concept of God cannot be exchanged for other concepts. We need to *interpret* the concept of God. His theology is an attempt to recover the meaning of the concept of God. To him God is the triune God who revealed himself indirectly in history through Jesus Christ. This revelation says something about the position of Jesus in relation to the Father. Pannenberg understands the Trinity as consisting of three self-distinct persons who constitute each other in their different distinctions. These different persons are an expression of the unity of the divine essence. The resurrection of Jesus becomes our hope for the future, when in eternity God will make the old new. Pannenberg sees God as the triune God of the future.

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<sup>42</sup> Pannenberg (1993:206-208) says that believers can now, through love, share in God’s nature. Love can unite the believers with God. He says that Nietzsche did not understand the biblical word *agape* as God’s

## **4.5 TED PETERS' CHALLENGE TO ATHEISM AND THEISM**

### **4.5.1 Introduction**

Peters postulates that theology is the rethinking of our faith in the triune God. This rethinking of our faith in the triune God must be contextual, acceptable and open to all people. “It must confront the world in and around the church and interpret the fundamental symbols of our faith in light of the contemporary context. This contemporary context is feeling the impact of an emerging postmodern mind accompanied by a global future consciousness – the consciousness of a potential avalanche of disasters about to thunder down upon us. We need a faith that can face the future” (Peters 1992:376). This is the faith that is needed in the light of modern atheism.<sup>43</sup> Peters (1992:12) says that “critical consciousness” led to atheism in the modern mind. What is hereby meant is that the modern mind has become critical of the concept and language about God. Who can prove that any talk about God is true or false? A range of interpretations regarding any statement about God is possible and there are no definite objective criteria to test these interpretations. Modern consciousness can help us to distance ourselves from the sources of religious life that are found in the ancient Christian symbols. We can use the tools of suspicion to doubt, objectify, criticise, analyse and depersonalise our faith in God. Peters’ challenge to modern atheism and theism lies within hermeneutics as a theological response, which I will explain in the next paragraph.

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love for his creatures. To him it served as an opposing concept to that of Christian love.

#### **4.5.2 Atheism and theism challenged**

Peters wants to answer the hermeneutical question: how can the pre-modern symbols of our faith speak meaningfully to us today as modern Christians who struggle with modern atheism? He agrees with Küng (1993) that the symbols of the Creeds of Faith do not speak to modern Christians. We live in a different world with different issues and concerns than those prevalent in biblical or Medieval times. These idioms and expressions have to be examined. What they said about God must be reformulated in a new idiom and context. Peters (1992:30) says that in answering the hermeneutical question, we must consider two principles, namely the notion of hypothetical reconstruction and that of holism.

Christian theology's main aim must always be the explication of the basic symbols that we find in Scripture. The rational character of theology is not grounded in pure reason, but consists rather of rational reflection on something pious, namely the symbols. Theology is second order discourse, while symbols are primary discourse. Theology is the activity of the church thinking about what it believes in. But the church must always do so critically and in a way that is open to the future (see Peters 1992:41-43).

Any theological method must consist of certain criteria, such as sources, norms, presuppositions and procedures (cf Peters 1992:32). There are theologians who choose to use the Bible, tradition, experience and reason as their criteria. When Peters uses the Bible as criterion, he regards the "biblical symbols" as a primary source.

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<sup>43</sup> Peters (1992:12) is of the opinion that Descartes' principle of doubt has become the cutting edge of modern critical thinking, which led Nietzsche to doubt subjectivity and God.

I employ this term [biblical symbols] because it does double duty: it gives primacy to scripture while reflecting the delicate interdependence of the four sources through history. This interdependence is reflected in two assumptions that I make. First, there is a tradition of symbolic speech about God that precedes scripture [sic] as well as follows it. Second, these symbols are associated with an originary experience that is tied to God's self-revelation, and internal to symbolic experience there is an inherent thrust toward [sic] reasoning, toward [sic] the process of interpretation.

(Peters 1992:33)

Theology is the act of explaining the biblical symbols.

Peters designates two functional levels of symbolic speech, namely the primal level, which includes literal and metaphoric understanding, and the secondary level, which is the result of primal understanding. This understanding leads to theological concepts and doctrines. It is important, however, to remember that, while defining these symbols, we should not take our own symbols and make them applicable to God or biblical material. Peters criticises the feminist theologians for being guilty of such practice. The task of theology is to interpret and not to create.

We are responding to God, not creating God. That event to which we are responding comes to us already packaged in the Bible. It comes wrapped in the language and symbols of those that experienced the revelation and then wrote about it the best they knew how. We have no access to the God revealed here except through the symbols in which the testimony is enshrined. What we have to learn about God comes from the interpretation of this first testimony.

(Peters 1992:43)

Christian theology must always be Hermeneutical theology. It means that we must submit ourselves to the symbols, so that they can help us to understand the deeper meaning that lies beneath it (Peters 1992:43). It does not mean that we interpret it in the light of our own experiences and our own ideologies. There is a norm to which the hermeneutical process must submit. The gospel of Jesus Christ must be the material norm and the Bible must be the formal norm (see Peters 1992:68). We can only speak responsibly of God when we take these norms into account.

Once these norms have been set, certain conditions for the interpretation of biblical symbols also apply. Peters mentions five. In the first place, the theological model must follow the same order as the Confessions of Faith. It is important to note that Küng, in his book *Credo: Das Apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis – Zeitgenossen erklärt* (1993), also applies this condition. Secondly, it must be systematic. In the third place, it must be ecumenical. In the

fourth place, it must take the context of the text into consideration. In the fifth place it must be in touch with the reality that is part of the modern and emerging postmodern mind of the West (Peters 1992:73). It must be critical. We need to ask ourselves: is it true? On what account is it true? It must answer contemporary questions.

Only when all of these conditions have been met can the process of interpretation begin. It is a responsible way of interpreting the biblical symbols in order to come to an understanding of God. Theology always occupies itself with the question of who God is. Christians look for the meaning of the life of Jesus to come to an understanding of God. One often gets the impression that humans know precisely who the God is of whom we speak. But on closer examination, one has to admit that more meanings are attached to the term *God*. “On the one hand, God can refer to the first person of the Trinity, the Father. On the other hand, God can refer to the Trinity as a whole, inclusive of Son and Spirit” (Peters 1992:82). When we consider all the references to God in the Bible, several means of reference, such as: El Shaddai, the God of power and mountains, the God of the covenant, the God of Israel, God as Father, Jesus as the Son of God, God as Lord, as lamb and as king, come to the attention. These are symbols that give us a picture by which to better understand the reality of God.

God is not literally a king or a father or a lamb. Nor are symbols paradigms, depicting a divine model to which humans should conform their behaviour. Rather than images or paradigms, symbols are markers that identify the experience of revelation. Symbols lie at the

metaxy, at the edge, where mundane reality intersects with the transcendent reality of God. The theological task is to explicate these symbols so they construct a world of meaning that orients human life toward God.

(Peters 1992:83)

We are aware of a reality that exists beyond us. We know a reality exists which we cannot fully see, understand or comprehend. Very often we ask ourselves the question: if there were no transcendental reality, where would everything go? To a reality of nihilism, nothingness with no future, like Nietzsche's madman who finds no God? "The question arising from the experience of brute thereness [sic] is the question of God. It is not the answer. It is the question. The answer comes initially by an act of God that is a revelation of God" (Peters 1992:84). This revelation of God is communicated to the believers through symbols. But the church fathers also made use of symbols to construct Christian structures. Therefore, we have the task of interpreting these symbols in their contextual settings to see if the understanding of the church fathers is still in accordance with the original meanings of the texts. If we find that their understanding is not in accordance with the original meaning of Scripture, we must break it off and build anew, albeit in a constructive manner.

Luther interpreted the first statement of the Apostles' Creed as the tension between the earthly and heavenly reality of God – God who is in heaven and on earth at the same time.

In the Old Testament God is referred to as Yahweh, who reveals himself in a physical and metaphysical manner. “The oneness of Israel’s God was explicated with great conceptual force as the Hebrew language gave way to Greek formulations during the Hellenistic period. This gave rise to what we now call classical theism, the formative influence on orthodox Christian theology. The heart of the synthesis between the Hebrew and Greek conceptualities is the identification of God with the source of being” (Peters 1992:88). This means of reference in analogy to human characteristics can be divided into two main groups, namely the negative and the positive. We must study these analogous human characteristics of God in their original contextual settings.

To illustrate the process of moving from the historical experience of Israel to casting the divine attributes in Greek conceptuality, I will examine three in the long list of attributes: first, ineffability as it derives from the experience of God’s holiness; second, eternity as it derives from the experience of God’s faithfulness; and third, omnipotence as it derives from the experience of God’s power. We might think of divine holiness, faithfulness, and power as metaphorical symbols found in scripture; and we might think of ineffability, eternity, and omnipotence as reflections upon these symbols leading to theological concepts.

(Peters 1992:89)



In the Bible *holiness* refers to God's action and name. Humankind's experience of God cannot be put into words. The *faithfulness* of God refers to his nature as the unchangeable, to stay the same for ever and ever. The *power* of God refers to his omnipotence to create everything and keep it in good order. It does not refer to him as a tyrannical despot who allows no chance or choice. It refers to him as a loving, caring God who looks after his creation and creatures.

When Peters discusses God as Trinity, he states that we must "go behind these classical formulations...to explicate the originary biblical symbols...." (Peters 1992:94). The doctrine of the Trinity was developed in a time that can be called "classical theism". Today there is a great deal of uncertainty surrounding the understanding of the Trinity (Peters 1992:95). We cannot describe the "incomprehensibility" of God as his mystery. The problem of understanding the Trinity is not about the numbers three in one. "What is at issue is whether or not God can define the Godself by becoming human, whether the Beyond can become Intimate, whether the infinite can become finite, and whether all of creation can be redeemed and taken up into the divine life" (Peters 1992:95). The idea of the Trinity is a theological construction. The key to understanding it lies in the relationship between God as the Father and his Son. The symbol of God as Father developed because Jesus was called God's Son. When we examine references in the Bible to God as Father, we see that in the Old Testament there are fourteen occurrences and in the New Testament one hundred and seventy. But in all these cases the references appear in the context of adoption. When Christ mentions God as Father, he does it in the light of the faithful who have become God's children through their faith. He has now become their Father through the working of

his Holy Spirit. In the New Testament there are four different ways in which God is referred to as the Father of Jesus, namely by indicating that Jesus was adopted by God, by identifying Jesus with the Father, by distinguishing Jesus from God, and by referring to Jesus as the extension of God.

During the first four centuries of Christian belief different theological reflections on the Trinity can be distinguished. There was the doctrine of modalism and subordinationism, which attempted to understand the relationship between Jesus and God. This doctrine became problematic when the church fathers tried to interpret this relationship with regard to the Trinity's immanence and transcendence. It is interesting to note that this tension can be resolved by distinguishing between the immanence and economy of the Trinity. "On the one hand, to affirm the immanent-economic distinction risks subordinating the economic Trinity and hence protecting transcendent absoluteness at the cost of genuine relatedness to the world. On the other hand, to collapse the two together risks producing a God so dependent upon the world for self-definition that divine freedom and independence are lost" (Peters 1992:109). Peters is of the opinion that the only way to resolve this dilemma is to think of the identity of the immanent and economical Trinity as eschatological. "God's trinitarian activity in temporal history becomes constitutive of the divine eternity. The redeemed creation is drawn up into the eternal life of God through the eschatological consummation" (Peters 1992:109). In this regard, he agrees with Moltmann, who regards the economical Trinity as the fulfilment of the immanent Trinity when the history and the experience of salvation are fulfilled.

In speaking of the creation, one must logically mention the Creator. The question we have to answer for ourselves is: is this creation a deed that just happened in the past or is this creation still, as a process, continuing? Peters postulates that this process will continue until the time that God will complete everything eschatologically. How God is related to the world, still remains a question today. Many doctrines attempt to provide an answer thereto, namely:

- pantheism, where God and his world are the same;
- deism, where God is distanced from his creation;
- theism, where God is involved in his creation from a distance;
- panentheism is a reconciliation of the insights of both deism and pantheism, by combining ontological immanence and transcendence. It is therefore possible to “affirm the presence of God in all things while affirming the freedom of all things to operate independently”(Peters 1992:124).

Peters chooses for a proleptical theism. “It is a proleptic view in that it depicts God as constantly engaged in drawing the world out of nonbeing and into existence with the aim of consummating this creative work in the future. God’s present work in and for the world anticipates the final work. This view is also theistic in that it affirms that God is active in, yet transcendent to, the work” (Peters 1992:125). There are the atheists and the naturalists who deny a God who is active in his creation. To understand creation as God’s work, we have to see it as a special revelation of God. We must look at it through the new deed of creation by God. We must look at it in the light of Jesus’ coming to earth, and his death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. It is important to note the relatedness of the

redemptive work of Jesus Christ and the creation of God. The creation of God is better understood in the light of his new creation, which took place in Jesus Christ.

It is not difficult to notice that our contemporary context differs from that of the Bible. Today, we are aware of several theories that explain the origin of creation, such as: the theories of evolution, ecology, entropy and the initial singularity. God is active in his creation in a proleptical way. God created the world in an extraordinary act and he has the power to change it whenever and however he wants to. “This leads us to the next principle of a proleptic theory of creation: God’s creative activity within nature and history derives from God’s redemptive work of drawing free and contingent beings into a harmonious whole” (Peters 1992:136). The whole is better than its parts. This theory of holism rules out two reductionist mistakes, namely archonical and atomic reductionism. Holism can thus be understood in the sense that God is active in nature and history. The reductionism of the modern mind forced us into a deterministic model of a world in which God’s actions are not quite clear. All events are seen as inextricably linked together by a single chain of cause and effect (Peters 1992:137). But we must remember that the whole has not yet arrived. In Jesus Christ we see the intentions of God with regard to his whole creation. In Jesus Christ we can see what his goals with the creation were, from beginning to end. But the end has not yet come. Creation awaits the future for fulfilment (cf Peters 1992:139).

A new life began when God blew his Holy Spirit into the deceased Jesus. The resurrection of Jesus is the eschatological deed of the Holy Spirit where God fulfilled his promises in Jesus Christ and renewed them for the rest of creation. The coming of the

Holy Spirit characterises the arrival of a new time. The task of the Spirit is to reconcile and construct the creation of God as a whole, after it having been torn apart by sin. “The Holy Spirit proceeds from this work of the Father through the Son to effect this ministry of reconciliation within the world. Reconciliation is a process leading eventually to its consummate fulfilment in the unity of all things in their creative and redemptive ground, God” (Peters 1992:233). In faith, the Holy Spirit makes Jesus Christ alive and present. We are looking forward to the new future that is made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. And in love the Holy Spirit makes reconciliation with God possible.

In postmodern times there is a growing need to see a spiritual and unifying power working in our world and lives. This working power is designated to a kind of cosmic power or spirit. This type of thinking is not new to Christian theology. It is widely accepted that it is wrong to see God the Father as the sole Creator of creation. “Not only is the Son, the Logos, the principle of order in creation, but the Spirit is the life-giving power of original as well as continuing creation” (Peters 1992:253). Moltmann also expounded this theme in his theology. His doctrine of creation is part of his doctrine of the Holy Spirit. “The Spirit who proceeds from the Father and shines forth in the Son is the very spirit of the universe, its cohesive structure, its source of energy. The Spirit is the principle of creativity operating at all levels of matter and life” (Peters 1992:253). The Holy Spirit is not the private possession of the historical, Christian churches. It is also part of all the cosmic processes that are still going on in our world. The Holy Spirit is working in and outside the church.

There is also a growing need for a unified type of understanding of the Spirit that is ecumenical and the same all over the universe. This leads to the idea that the reality of all things is alike. However, when looking at the universe, we get the impression that not everything is in unity. An infinite number of stars and planets in the galaxy still remain unknown to humanity. We therefore have to acknowledge that we still do not have the whole picture. The only time that we can and will experience the whole picture is (when we are) in heaven. What we experience now is merely a shadow of what is yet to come. What we experience now is a proleptical unity of that which lies ahead in future. “The Spirit of God is the spirit of unity and truth because it is the work of God to bring the creation to a consummate unity in the eschatological kingdom” (Peters 1992:255).

“Salvation is already present to us in faith. It is present in faith but not in experience, at least not in uninterrupted, continual, plenary, uncontradictable experience” (Peters 1992:306). We already share in the new future of God, although not yet in full. When we refer to the last things ever to happen, we call it *eschatology*, which is derived from the Greek words τ ᾶ ἔ σ χ α τ α . Eschatology originates from the Easter event. The resurrection of Jesus is the foundation on which we base our thoughts about the future. But it has its limits. We do not exactly know how the new future in Christ will be. Bultmann (1948:15-53; 1964:21-36) said that eschatology had to be interpreted in the light of the mythological worldview of the Bible. He saw eschatology not as part of a historically given setting, but as something that belongs to the sphere of faith. “Based on the earlier discussion on the significance of Jesus’ resurrection, it would seem clear that Easter cannot be understood rightly except as

prolepsis, except as an anticipation in Jesus' person of what God will do to transform and renew the whole of creation" (Peters 1992:307; see Peters 2002:304).

Peters (2003:69) distinguishes between three words that describe this prolepsis, namely *futurum*, *adventus* and *venturum*. Our modern ideas presuppose *futurum* when we think of the future as the result of the causal happenings in the past. With *adventus* is indicated that it is something totally new. It does not stem from any past experience that explains or determines the present or the future. In this regard he refers to the example of the kingdom of God, which is a totally new concept that does not come from this world. "The kingdom of God must then come as an advent, as an act of divine grace whereby the creation undergoes genuine renewal. The future renewal of all things that the advent of the divine kingdom will bring has already appeared ahead of time in the person of Jesus from Nazareth, the proleptic advent of the ultimate rule of God" (Peters 1992:309). With the word *venturum* he means that the present is taken up by the power of what is yet to come. When we participate in the Easter event it is not only by means of memory, but also by participation in the bigger reality, which it denotes.

To refer to the new in the sense of *adventus*, means the old has to die. The future always has an element of new life and death. These elements appear in even the earliest symbolism. We find it in the paradise events where Adam and Eve ate from the tree of good and evil. God banned them from paradise, because he did not want them to eat from the tree of life and death. If they became part of sin after eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, eating from the tree of life and death would then be a death sentence for them. "Death

is the door that God slams shut on evil and suffering within creation” (Peters 1992:310). According to the law of Moses, death is the result of sin, while according to the gospel it is a gift which opens the door to a life with God, forever and ever, without any suffering and sin. God made it possible through the resurrection of Jesus as a new glorified reality.

What our resurrected bodies will look like cannot be determined with certainty. No one knows. The only thing that we know for certain is that the resurrection of our spiritual bodies can only take place at the final *eschaton* (cf Peters 2002:301, 320-321). “If there is no cosmic transformation, then there is no resurrection; and if there is no resurrection, then Christian faith is in vain and of all people believers are most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:14, 19)” (Peters 1992:315; see Peters 2002:301-303). There are certain symbols in the Bible that depict life after death, with issues such as the last judgement of God and the doctrine of heaven and hell being examples thereof. The believers will be judged according to their faith, which is reflected in their deeds. Heaven is symbolically depicted as the place where God will be glorified, as the revelation of God, as the paradise, the Garden of Eden and as the new Jerusalem. Heaven actually means to be with God in all eternity. Hell is the opposite thereof. Today, more and more people believe that the biblical picture of hell does not correspond with the love of God. This has given rise to doctrines that propagate universal salvation and redemption. “In short, the affirmation of human freedom seems to require the affirmation of a possible realm that eternally rejects the love and grace of God” (Peters 1992:325).



The problem with the doctrine of predestination is that it is grounded on the idea that God is temporarily not present in the history of life, that God is not a living God and that he is bound to a mechanistic creation over which he has no power. This is wrong. God is free and can never be bound by human ideas and decisions.

I believe we need to start with destiny. What is our destiny? It is ultimately to live with God in the new creation. The meaning of all events and the definition of all actualities will be determined by the context of the whole of history, a whole that will be established only at the advent of God's kingdom. That destiny will determine who we will be. Retroactively, it determines who we are today. We are now on the way, becoming who we will be. Hence we know who we are proleptically – that is, in anticipation of our final reality yet to be established by God.

(Peters 1992:331)

Today we are confronted with the brokenness of our existence. We do not have the slightest idea of what wholeness or totality means. Therefore, the theology of the twenty-first century must provide humankind with vision and direction through ecumenical unity and ethical deeds, which are orientated towards the future. We can no longer hold on to our ideas and forget about the world's ideas. There are other ideas and opinions, which we have to take into account. Peters (1992:334) pleads for ecumenical pluralism instead of radical

pluralism. According to him, “[r]adical pluralism is an ideological stance that tends to lose sight of the whole while advocating an inviolate plurality of parts. I will recommend that the better vision is that of ‘ecumenical pluralism,’ which affirms the unity of the human race as an article of faith even though empirical differences and divisions seem so strong.”

If one subscribes to this vision, your point of departure in any discussion will not be to differ, but to seek common ground for mutuality. We can use the example of God as common ground for all the different religions. All religions have something of the universal human being before his or her God. Therefore theology and the people of the church must proclaim that the coming kingdom of God will reveal the whole of the human race, that which cannot be seen yet. Peters (1992:336) calls for “ecumenical pluralism”, which I will explain in chapter 5. In the postmodern mind there is a tendency to seek the religious. Interests have changed. There is a tendency to return to the ancient traditions, to learn mystical techniques and esoteric symbolism. Conversations between different religions have become a necessity. Peters (1992:338-340) is in favour of what he calls a “confessional universalistic position”, in terms of which people share their and their church’s confessional doctrines of faith and religious characteristics with other parties that differ from them and at the same listen to their opinions. To ensure a sober-minded conversation, Peters suggest four rules of conduct, namely:

- the openness to listen properly to the other party; there cannot be any confessional exclusiveness;
- each party has to have an opinion about the issues being discussed;
- an atmosphere of mutual respect, love and goodwill must prevail;

- there must be enough time and energy for the conversation.

Peters (1992:342) does not agree with theologians such as Hick, Küng, Knitter and Smith, who assume a critical position with regard to the belief that Jesus Christ is the criterion for Christian unity. They choose to speak of a theocentric model in the universal picture of all the religions. The problem with such thinking is that people tend to forget their own confessional uniqueness.

The confessional universalistic position is also more honest regarding the fundamental claims of the Christian faith; and it is better able on this count to understand sympathetically the normative if not exclusivist claims of other traditions such as Islam. On the one hand, it grants the realistic possibility that dialogue just might end with a standoff, with a set of claims and counterclaims with no resolution, and with no pretense of an invisible higher unity of agreement. On the other hand, this is by no means inevitable.

(Peters 1992:348)

Peters believes in universal salvation for all people on the grounds of the love of God and the fact that he is our only future. He says that Barth and Rahner, although they agree on the principle that God's grace is universal, differ from him on the principle that God's salvation and redemption are only for those whom God elects. He believes they are not consistent in

their thoughts. “Now one could sharply criticize [sic] Barth and Rahner on systematic grounds for lack of consistency and coherence, for the inability to bring universal grace and double destiny together” (Peters 1992:356). This, however, is not the mistake of these two theologians, but can be traced back to the difficulty of interpreting the biblical symbols that portray salvation and redemption.

Christians ought to live within the postmodern paradigm, environmentally friendly, creative, holistic and futuristic. We ought to live as redeemed creatures in Jesus Christ with freedom and love. We must see love as the process of creation. Love can lead to numerous relationships. Love can mend the brokenness of our existence and make everything and everyone whole again. Love can bring people together. Love can also lead to radical improvement. Love can be the reason for revolutions and change. Our trust must be in the God of the future, which is present to us through faith. “Divine love ties us to the ultimate future and gives us the security we need; that love has been liberated within our souls by the power of the gospel to create new life amid the present aeon of death” (Peters 1992:360).

Theology as theology of the coming kingdom of God must ensure that governments know their limits. They must know that God will also judge them. “Although, on the one hand, we want to affirm a positive continuity between the future of God’s justice and its political embodiment in the present time, on the other hand, we need to keep them sufficiently distinct so as to be able to render critical judgment [sic] against failures in the present” (Peters 1992:362). We must set the guidelines to help us focus on the idea that our ethical thoughts must be grounded on the eschatological kingdom of God. We must stand firm on

the promises of the kingdom of God and the fulfilment thereof for the whole of creation. We must focus on heaven and live on earth. We ought to do deeds of faith from the certainty of our future in God. We must strive for the whole of the future in the present (see Peters 1992:365).

We ought to live our lives according to the faith we confess in the triune God. This is part of the true nature of theology. We need faith to handle our future, faith that is grounded in Jesus Christ who is the future of God. We can share this truth and certainty with Christians all over the world.

The destiny of Jesus is a microcosm of what we can expect for ourselves and for the macrocosmic order, namely, passing through destruction to resurrection and new creation. The present aeon is experiencing the brokenness and fragmentation of a fallen world, of a world yearning for a wholeness that it does not yet have. In Jesus Christ, God has given us a promise that the present yearning for wholeness is not in vain. Actually, God has given us more than a mere promise. In the Easter resurrection of Jesus, God has given us a prolepsis of what is to come, a preactualization [sic] of the eschatological wholeness that will imbue all things.

(Peters 1992:376-377)

According to Peters (1993:146) the doctrine of the Trinity “consists of an explication of the biblical symbols that tries to do justice to the paradox of the beyond and intimate dimensions of God’s being, to what the philosophers of religion call God’s absoluteness and God’s relatedness.” He feels that Rahner’s rule does justice to the absoluteness and the relatedness of God. God is indeed, as Trinity, open to the future. “The value of engaging in Trinity talk is that it offers an opportunity to remind ourselves that the God of the beyond has become intimate, that the God of creation has entered our world as its redeemer and sanctifier, and that we have good reason to hope for resurrection into the new creation” (Peters 1993:187).

#### **4.5.3 Reflecting on the challenges that Peters offered to modern atheism and theism**

The Christian faith must always be an ecumenical faith. It is the faith that God will make the whole of creation new and that he will include everyone in this new creation. We, as believers, already live in the certainty of this future. Therefore we ought to share our faith with our world, react with hope to all the problems of our broken world and submit to the love of God to make us new people. He chooses for proleptic theism instead of modern theism. According to Peters, God is the one who already made the future of believers possible through the resurrection of Jesus and in this way already started the coming of the new kingdom. God can only be thought of from the certainty of the future. God is the God of the future who has the prospect, with the resurrection of Jesus Christ, of a whole new future for the whole of creation (see Peters 2003:63, 76-77).

#### 4.5.4 Summary

I have focused on Peters' concept of God, the dogma, and the practice of the church. Peters is of the opinion that the concept of God is mainly derived from biblical symbols. His theology is an attempt to study the biblical symbols, which bear witness to the mystery of God's being. He is of the opinion that the symbols of God in the Bible need interpretation. We as theologians should define these symbols. We need to surrender ourselves to these symbols. The doctrine of the Trinity consists of an interpretation of the biblical symbols that tries to explain the paradox of the transcendent and immanent dimensions of God's being. Peters admits that the Trinity is a theological construct. He agrees with Pannenberg that the key to understand the Trinity lies in the relationship between God as the Father and his Son. In the early church the doctrine of the Trinity became problematic when the church fathers tried to interpret this relationship with regard to the Trinity's immanence and transcendence. Peters says the only way to resolve this dilemma is to think of the identity of the immanent and economical Trinity as eschatological. He agrees with Moltmann that the economical Trinity is the fulfilment of the immanent Trinity. This will happen when the history and the experience of salvation are fulfilled. The resurrection of Jesus Christ already made the future of believers possible. We can only think of God out of the certainty of this future. He is our *only* future.