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The Word and the Spirit – Michael Welker's theological hermeneutics Part 2

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Abstract

In the first part of the essay it will be argued that Welker's differentiated understanding of the Word allows him to make sense of the relation between the Spirit and the Word. In the light of the unbreakable interrelation between the Word and the Spirit, it is possible to understand why Welker finds the biblical traditions to be the primary witness to the Spirit of God. It will also become clear why he understands the biblical traditions to be convincing in pluralistic societies. The second part of the essay focuses on the deep polemical foundations of Welker's theology of the Spirit. Welker, it is argued, who wants to write a 'realistic theology', develops his thoughts on the Spirit against the background of what he conceives to be the captivity of a theology of the Spirit in metaphysical and abstract theories, dialogical two-way thinking, and social moralism. These forms of thought serve as the negative background against which Welker then further develops his thoughts on theology.

Key words

Michael Welker, Spirit of God, biblical traditions, Word of God, pluralism.

1. The Spirit and the Word, the Word and the Spirit

1. Welker understands the Spirit and the Word of God to be unbreakably interconnected (Welker 2000b:141).[1] In the light of the depth of this Word Welker finds it impossible to play off the Word against the Spirit (Welker 1996a:164).[2]

1 Cf. Kim (2013).

2 He writes: "How can we play off the direct presence of Christ among a third of people living today and his indirect presence far beyond that; how can we play off the workings of the biblical traditions in a cultural history which goes back over millennia; how can we play off the power of the direct preaching in millions of communities on this earth

When taking into consideration that the Word of God 'edifies people, comforts them, raises them up, enlivens them, delights them, strengthens them, liberates them, allows them to hope, gives them orientation and certainty' (Welker 1996b:80) and that this Word also 'puts them in question, terrifies them, binds them, oppress them, admonishes and judges them' (Welker 1996b:80), it is clear why Welker finds this Word to become interchangeable with the Spirit of God, i.e. 'dieses Wort scheint nun in seiner Macht, in seiner wunderbaren Kraft, in seiner Geheimnisfülle und in seiner Dramatik geradezu *mit dem Geist Gottes verwechselbar zu werden*' (Welker 1996a:164). The 'awe', 'wonder', and 'awesome mystery of God' that Macchia ascribes to the Spirit are for Welker thus also to be ascribed to the Word (Macchia 1996; 1997). He thus understands the Spirit and the Word in what he calls a 'wechselseitigen Durchdringung' (Welker 1996a:164). What does this 'mutual interpenetration' mean?

The Spirit, on the one hand, is dependent on the Word. This insight is of great importance for an understanding of Welker's theology of the Spirit. The Word gives content to the Spirit, i.e. without the Word it would not be possible to distinguish the Spirit from other possible demonstrations of power. The Word gives human beings the capacity for knowledge of the Spirit of God (Welker 1996a:165).

The Word, on the other hand, is also dependent on the Spirit. The Spirit gives life to the Word, i.e. without the Spirit it becomes 'frozen', 'rigid', and 'fossilised', which means that the Word without the Spirit is no more than an outdated book (Welker 1996a:165). Welker thus underlines what could be described as the selflessness of the Spirit, i.e. the Spirit is a 'selbstlose Kraft' constantly referring human beings not to itself, but to the Word and the content of the Word, connecting human beings with the 'one Word of God' (Welker 1996a:164). It is only in this interconnectedness of the Spirit with the Word, that the Spirit is shown to be the Spirit of truth, the Spirit of God.

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every day and every week, and the many indirect emanations of this event, against the working of the Spirit? How can we underestimate what is certainly ambiguous, but equally certainly breath-taking and overwhelming power of the indirect activity of the 'word of God' in the most varied human appropriations?" (Welker 1996b:80).

The importance of the Spirit in relation to the Word, however, becomes particularly clear in Welker's answer to the question of the *divinitus inspirata,* i.e. the controverted question of whether or not the biblical traditions are 'inspired' (Welker 1994a:272), which he discusses in *God the Spirit*.

2. For Welker, this question is important because applying to the biblical authors 'inspiration' involves a 'Bedeutungsverschiebung', i.e. a shift in meaning. Here he follows Barth who emphasised that the biblical traditions 'grounded upon itself apart from the mystery of Christ and the Holy Spirit became a "paper Pope", and unlike the Pope in Rome it was wholly given up into the hands of its interpreters' (Barth 1978:525).[3] With Barth he thus warns against the biblical traditions being misused with the aid of this shift in meaning.

Welker critically emphasises, however, that without the further development of the 'mystery of Christ and the Holy Spirit', what is meant with 'inspiration' will remain impervious and subject to misuse. He therefor answers the question as to the 'inspiration' of the biblical traditions on the basis of an articulated theology of the Spirit. With this theology in mind, he is able to develop a conception of 'inspiration' that 'does not lead into absurd conflicts with realism, rationality, and historical sensibility' (Welker 1994a:274), but takes the character of the biblical traditions into account.

In the light of the discussed 'fourfold weight' it is clear that in the biblical traditions there lies diverse testimonies that reflect in multi-perspectival ways the fullness of the being and work of God.

It became clear that the experience and knowledge of God that are deeply rooted in these traditions are not homogenised, i.e. 'sometimes they appear to be in conflict with each other or incompatible with each other' (Welker 1994a:275). It is important to realize that for Welker the potential of these textual traditions lies precisely therein. In this way the biblical traditions are 'clearly subordinate to the reality to which they relate themselves and to which they testify' (Welker 1994a:276). This reality, i.e. the reality of God to which the biblical traditions testify, is for him richer than one that could

3 Cf. Barth (1990:202–247).

be described by one experience of God, one text or even by one set of texts (Welker 1994a:276).

The multi-perspectival character of the biblical traditions thus gives expression to the fact that these biblical texts *are* nothing more than testimonies to God. These testimonies thus consciously refer to experiences and knowledge that are concrete, partial and fragmentary, i.e. as testimonies 'they cannot help but declare this concrete, partial, and fragmentary perception of what has happened, of what they have seen and heard, of what they regard as significant and important' (Welker 1994a:276).

The important insight here for Welker is that it is through *these* texts that the Spirit 'produces a charged field of experiences' (Welker 1994a:275). The Spirit, firstly, enables these testimonies to point to the reality of God and to reflect it. The Spirit continuously brings the testimonies of the biblical traditions together concentrating them to point to the fullness of the being and work of God. Through the Spirit, God concentrates the biblical testimonies on Godself.

The Spirit, secondly, enables these testimonies to work out of the most diverse settings in life *into* the most divergent settings in life, i.e. 'in various historical, cultural, social, intellectual, and other contexts, these testimonies can find their voices' (Welker 1994a:276). Here Welker follows Calvin in what he labelled the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti internum,* i.e. the internal testimony of the Spirit. With this he means that, through the Spirit, the testimonies of the biblical traditions evoke pluriform responses to the being and work of God, i.e. 'experiences, answers, and reactions' (Welker 1994a:277–278).

In this light it is clear why Welker not only finds it meaningful and correct, but also materially necessary to concede that the biblical traditions are 'inspired' (Welker 1994a:276). He highlights that without the Spirit, the biblical traditions will be nothing but human words.

In their review, 'God the Spirit', published in *Theology Today,* Miroslav Volf and Marianne Meye Thompson, then of Fuller Theological Seminary, pointed to 'some major issues on which we would want more clarity' (Volf and Thompson 1996:384). In the light of Welker's understanding of the inspiration of the biblical traditions they asked why it is precisely through these texts that the Spirit 'produces a charged field of experiences'. Why, they

asked, precisely through these texts, rather than through so many other, extra-biblical texts? And in what way, if in any, does the Spirit produce a charged field of experience differently through these texts than through many other texts? For them, a theology that seeks to take the divinity of God seriously and to be 'biblical' - whether biblical in Welker's sense or any other - 'must give a precise theological answer to these questions, as well as to the question of wherein the unity of the plural testimonies of the Scripture consists' (Volf and Thompson 1996:384).

With his conception of the interrelation between the Spirit and the differentiated Word Welker has been able to give clarifying answers to the question of the central importance of the biblical traditions in his theology of the Spirit. With his differentiated understanding of the Word he has also been able to clarify the question of wherein the unity of the plural testimonies of the biblical traditions consists. That he has been able to give adequate answers to this concern, however, is accentuated in his interpretation of 'pluralism' and the authority of the biblical traditions in a time characterized by 'pluralism'. Welker's interpretation of 'pluralism', which will henceforth be investigated, is of particular importance for an understanding of his theology of the Spirit.

3. For Welker the inability to conceptualise the internal composition of pluralistic societies are one of the major problems of the *zeitgeist* (Welker 2001a:23).[4] Although the concept of pluralism is often discussed, he finds that the character of pluralism, and the implications thereof for societies are not adequately grasped. This is particularly clear in the collection of essays, *Kirche im Pluralismus* (Welker 1995a) and in the essay 'Was ist Pluralismus' (Welker 1999). Here he argues that pluralistic societies often either confuse the composition of pluralism with what he refers to as a diffuse plurality or formulate conceptions of pluralism that is characterised by its infinite amplitude of possibilities. For him, what these viewpoints have in common is that 'they haven't understood anything about pluralism' (Welker 2002a:388).

It is interesting that in his *The Holy Spirit: In Biblical Teaching, through the Centuries, and Today,* Anthony Thiselton, the former head of theology

4 Cf. Smit (2008).

at Nottingham University, criticizes Welker precisely when it comes to pluralism. Thiselton finds Welker to be too positive about the concept of pluralism and wants him to also take note of the dangers of the concept (Thiselton 2013:449), '…questionable are the pluralism and postmodernism that pervade the book (*God the Spirit*). In certain respects the postmodernism is healthy in opposing the standardisation of knowledge ... but its attention to diffusion and fragmentation *has an unhealthy side,* which Christians too readily think is beneficial to Christian faith' (Thiselton 2013:444).

To understand Welker's conception of the authority of the biblical traditions in a time characterised by pluralism, what he, in 'Wovon der freiheitliche Staat lebt. Die Quellen politischer Loyalität im spätmodernen Pluralismus' in *Freiheit verantworten,* a *Festschrift* for Wolfgang Huber, calls 'late modern' pluralism (Welker 2000b:225), it is important, however, to apprehend what he means with 'structured pluralism'. He explains this inter alia in the essay 'Christentum und strukturierter Pluralismus'.

For Welker, 'pluralism' or a society characterised by 'pluralism', is one that consists out of different self-constituting communities that subsists in divergent communal structures that are bound together by e.g. the state (Welker 1995c:50). This simple definition makes it clear for him that a 'pluralistic' society must be able 'to bind together a multiplicity of distinctive subcultural forms of community, normativities, and morals with the social forms and norms of the whole society' (Welker 1995c:50). In the essays 'Pluralismus und Pluralismus des Geistes' (Welker 1993) and 'Warum brauchen pluralistische Gesellschaften christliche Theologie?' (Welker 2000d) he emphasizes that these societies must not only make the multiplicity of conceptions compatible with overarching general forms. The overarching general forms must be so constructed that they maintain and strengthen the multiplicity (Welker 1995c:50). Welker's main question is thus *how* the relationship between these differentiated forms are to be thought out.

This is particularly clear in Auke Compaan's dissertation inter alia on Welker's thought on 'pluralism', *Kreatiewe Pluralisme?,* and his essay 'Om te kan onderskei tussen chaos, vae pluraliteit en pluralisme? Wet en evangelie in die denke van Michael Welker'. Here he argued that, for Welker,

'pluralism' consists out of different systems and associations (Compaan 2007:69). For him 'pluralism', on the one hand, consists out of *systemic forms* of community. These systemic forms, which the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann labelled 'functional systems', are the stabilizing forms of community (Welker 2001a:90). He finds 'pluralism', on the other hand, to be comprised out of *associative forms* of community. These associative forms are the dynamic forms of community, which the German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas labelled 'civil-society associations' (Welker 1995c:51). What do these loaded concepts mean?

Welker finds 'pluralistic' societies to have a multi-systemic structure (Welker 2000c:155–156). These societies cultivate the differentiation of a specific set of social systems that promote the welfare and preservation of the whole society from divergent viewpoints (Welker 2000d:21), i.e. politics, law, religion, education, science, the market, the media, technology, police, military, healthcare, art and family (Welker 1985).

In these 'pluralistic' societies every system, on the one hand, performs a function that is essential for the whole and, one the other, strive for autonomy (Welker 1998a:418), i.e. against the influence of other systems (Welker 2001a:92). It is important that a level of autonomy is granted to these systems in order for them to optimize their gestalt and their work for the benefit of the whole society. These societies react nervously when a system is either too dominant and or when a system is endangered by other systems. The principal insight here is thus that a balance of powers are the important for this 'pluralistic' order (Welker 1998a:416–418).

In the light of this multi-systemic structure it is clear why pluralism is neither diffuse nor characterised by infinite possibilities (Welker 2000d:21). This is also clear in the fact that the occurrence of a new system is scarce and the transformation of a system extends over a long period, i.e. 'we do not launch a new social system every decade' (Welker 2001b:92).

Above and beyond the development of these systems, 'pluralistic' societies also develop 'associations' (Compaan 2007:69). Welker mentions that human beings often find purposes for which they gather (Welker 2000c:157), i.e. 'all sorts of clubs, groups, and initiatives bring us together to share

and promote our interests and goals' (Welker 2001a:92). He emphasizes, however, that 'pluralistic' societies develop particular types of associations (Welker 1995c:51).

These associations want to make an impact on the whole of society by shaping, reshaping, stabilising and destabilising the social systems. It is for Welker important that the associations are not merely being made over by these systems. In direct and indirect ways these associations must further their own particular interests precisely by influencing the social systems in differentiated manners (Welker 2000d:22).

This complex interaction between the differentiated systems and associations institute the circulation of power in pluralistic societies. This circulation of power gives a more defined structure or gestalt to these societies. In the essay 'Kirche zwischen pluralistischer Kultur und Pluralismus des Geistes' translated as 'And also upon the menservants and the maidservants in those days will I pour out my Spirit'. On pluralism and the promise of the Spirit'. Welker thus indicates that 'pluralism' requires the relation of three types of differences (Welker 1995c:52), i.e. the differences between a multitude of functional systems; the differences of a multiplicity of associations; and also the differences between the functional systems and associations. These differences constitute for him the circulation of powers that are imperative for what he refers to as 'structured pluralism'.

> …only in the deliberate cultivation of this three-fold set of differences, in this complexly structured 'plurality', can the subtle balance of power and the demanding 'regulation' of the 'circulation of powers' which are characteristic of the pluralistic societies of our time and world become possible (Welker 1995c:52).

This 'structured pluralism', on the one hand, brings with it a particular efficiency and freedom, but on the other hand, encumbrances, i.e. it brings with it burdens for human beings who increasingly have to live with conflicts of interest (Welker 2001a:25). In these situations it is imperative for him not to ask for simplistic 'Übersichtsangebote', i.e. solutions brought about through all-encompassing standpoints. It is, rather, of importance to see that these situations ask for differentiated 'Orientierungshilfen', i.e. direction in the most divergent settings in life (Welker 2002a:388).

The principal insight here is that for Welker the pluralistic constitution of the biblical canon allows it to give adequate direction in these divergent settings in life (Welker 2001a:25).[5] He refers, furthermore, to 'kanonischen Verweisungszusammenhänge', i.e. coherences in references in the biblical canon that enables interconnections to be established between the pluralistic contexts of society and of the canon. Here he also refers to a 'seriöse spezifische systematische Bezüge', i.e. serious, specific and systematic interrelations. To find these interrelations is for him also the task of academic theology today, i.e. 'to elaborate specific models that allow the establishment of fruitful relations between the pluralistic canonical traditions on the one hand, and the orientation profiles and needs for orientation in societal and cultural pluralism on the other hand' (Welker 2002a:389).

The question, however, is what these interrelations between pluralistic contexts of society and of the canon mean? For Welker the answer is not to be found in a 'main switch' or a 'one-size-fits-all' formula. He rather wants to make use of multi-contextual and multi-systemic methods, i.e. methods that 'relate systematic differences to systematic differences' (Welker 2002a:390). What does this mean?

For Welker this means that e.g. a theme is observed in at least two different canonical contexts, i.e. 'why e.g. is this theme treated different in context A than in context B? How do we evaluate this difference? What do we learn from it?' (Welker 2002a:390). This difference is then brought in relation to a comparable difference in at least two historical or contemporary contexts (Welker 2001a:26). It is these differentiated interrelations, i.e. 'the drawing of relations between presumed processes of development and decline', that Welker finds to be instructive (Welker 2002a:390). He thus wants to think not in terms of a mere continuity, but in terms of a threefold discontinuity.

With this emphasis on discontinuity he wants to limit arbitrary interrelations. He finds it pointless to 'decide' on a difference in the light of

5 In an interview with *Dialog*, as an answer to the question of what goals he still hopes to achieve, Welker accentuated that he would still like to convince his neo-protestant colleagues that a biblical theology, working at an interdisciplinary level, is indispensable for a satisfactory conception of their ecclesial and cultural situation. Cf. Welker (1998b:148–149).

a particular biblical text. It is clear for him that different human beings will 'decide' differently which henceforth will yield simple results. When, on the other hand, two or more points of reference are considered, i.e. 'to mark differences and developments', the interrelations between these contexts tend to have significant results (Welker 2002a:390).

In concentrations of this kind, i.e. 'concentrations that are multi-systemic and sensitive to difference', the biblical traditions characterised by its particular historical, cultural, canonical, and theological weight can provide direction in the most divergent settings in life (Welker 2002a:390). It is thus apprehensible why Welker finds the biblical traditions to be authoritative in a *zeitgeist* characterised by 'pluralism' (Welker 2000a:241).

In the light of this differentiated conception of the biblical traditions and the relation between these traditions and the Spirit, i.e. that on which Welker basis his entire theology of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to explore the polemical roots of his theology, i.e. that against which he develops his own perspectives on the Spirit.

2. The Spirit, the Word of God, and a theology of the Holy Spirit.

1. Welker finds the dominant forms of theological reflection in the West to be captive in forms of thought in which the Spirit can be grasped only with great difficulty, namely 'old European metaphysics', 'dialogical personalism', 'subjectivist faith' and 'social moralism' (Welker 1994a:40). For him, theologians have for too long let themselves be ruled by forms of thought that have been influential for a while, but incapacitated them and 'blocked their access to the wealth of their own contents and traditions' (Welker 1994a:41).

These forms, specifically when it comes to the Spirit, still influences theology today, i.e. 'their simplicity and ready plausibility are alluring, and they possess a corresponding universal effectiveness and capacity to win out over competitors' (Welker 1994a:41). The meaning of these forms of thought, which plays an important part in Welker's theology of the Spirit, will henceforth be explained in more detail.

2. The first form of thought against which Welker consciously develops his theology of the Spirit is what he refers to as abstract or *metaphysical theories*. This form of thought 'sees the essential contribution of religion and theology in the fact that they make available and solidify one universal system of reference' (Welker 1994a:41). In this form of thought, theology is supposed to understand 'the whole', the 'unity of reality' with formulas such as 'totality of meaning' or 'universal history' (Welker 1994a:41). In this sense, theology sketches 'the' interconnection, 'the' unity or 'the' order of reality, i.e. a reality that have become so multifaceted that a broad outline is impossible (Welker 1994a:42).

For Welker these totalising conceptions are 'ideologieverdächtig und unerträglich', by which he means that even the most abstract totalising conceptions are determined by specific interests, and can therefor function in an ideological manner (Welker 1992a:50). He finds these conceptions to be intolerable since every setting in life formulates distinctive ideas of what totality is, which cannot necessarily be integrated in what he calls a parts-whole pattern, i.e. conceptions of what totality is from a specific setting in life cannot fit into a pattern where different ideas of what totality is make up the whole.

He concedes that it is possible to understand the Spirit in this form of thought and to legitimise the usage of this form with the biblical traditions' reference to the ubiquity, omnipresence or the universality of the Spirit, i.e. as 'a force or structure that infuses all reality or surpasses and transcends all reality' (Welker 1994a:42). The question for Welker, however, is if this form of thought can adequately grasp the being and work of the Spirit of the biblical traditions. To answer this question he asks how the references that seem to be in agreement with this form of thought are to be related to the abundance of references that describe the specific being and work of the Spirit. In the light of these types of questions Welker finds this form of thought to 'not tell us very much' (Welker 1994a:42).

In his theology he therefore proposes to see the above-mentioned work of the Spirit in the light of the definite perspectives on the being and work of the Spirit as described in the biblical traditions. In this manner a theology of the Spirit reaches a level of complexity that is not only able to relate to contemporary questions, but is consistent with the composite composition of the biblical traditions (Welker 1994a:40).

3. In the essay 'Theologie im öffentlichen Diskurs außerhalb von Glaubensgemeinschaften?' translated as 'Theology in Public Discourse Outside Communities of Faith?', published in a collection of essays, *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life: Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for the Twenty-first Century,* Welker refers to a second form of thought against which he consciously develops his theology of the Spirit. For him it is important to see that the Spirit cannot be sufficiently grasped in forms of thought that reduces complex relations to a *dialogical* frame of thought.

This form of thought 'attempts to comprehend all essential contents of faith, thought, and action in the I-Thou correlation' (Welker 2000e:118). It tries to understand the self-relation of the triune God, the relation between God and human beings, and the relations between human beings themselves by making use of a simple two-way form of dialogue (Welker 1994a:43). It is thus only in a fully distorted manner that the Spirit can be depicted in theological models and in forms of religious thought 'that systematically and methodically reduce the rich and complex relation between God and human beings and their fellow creatures to an I-Thou relation between God and "the human person"' (Welker 1994a:40).

He affirms that this form of thought is able to appeal to the biblical traditions as its foundation. He finds the references that relate *the Spirit* to this form of thought, however, to be particularly rare (Welker 1992:52). Here Welker is critical of Barth and dialectical theology who 'turned this constellation into an absolute paradigm' (Welker 1994a:43). He strengthens his argument by showing how, in his doctrine of reconciliation, Barth himself acknowledged the problems related to this form of thought, i.e. 'he attempted precisely with regard to the doctrine of the Holy Spirit to break loose from the dialogical reduction and imprisonment' (Welker 1994a:44). To understand the Spirit thus requires that 'the basic formal patterns of dialogistic theology be relativized' (Welker 1994a:44). An understanding of the Spirit, on the other hand, makes it possible to broaden this dialogical form of thought and to replace it with more relevant forms.

This is pertinently clear in Welker's *Gottes Offenbarung* (Welker 2012a), translated as *God the Revealed* (Welker 2014a), where he develops his thought on Jesus Christ through the particular lens of a theology of the Spirit. Here he further differentiates the metaphysical and the dialogical forms of thought into what he refers to as 'religious existentialism'.

4. This form 'draws the theistic God or the great "Thou" of dialogism completely into interiority and self-reference' (Welker 2000e:118). In the essays 'Subjektivistischer Glaube als religiöse Falle', translated as 'Subjectivist 'Faith' as a Religious Trap', and 'Selbst-Säkularisierung und Selbst-Banalisierung' he describes this form as a *subjectivist faith*. This is a form of faith that in an emphatic self-relation believes itself to be certain of a removed entity that is at the same time remarkably close (Welker 2004a:239),[6] i.e. faith is reduced to an inwardness, a feeling, an immediate relation to a 'inneren Ganz Anderen in mir' (Welker 2001c:15). Welker finds this form not only to be dangerous for a theology of the Spirit; 'this form can become the death of theology' (Welker 2000e:118).

5. The fourth form of thought against which Welker develops his theology of the Spirit is *social moralism*. This form brings all experience and action 'under a pressure to change by giving a fundamental place to the conception of a process, regulated at both the individual and the community level, which is ruled by a system of gradation in terms of "better" and 'worse' (Welker 1994a:44). Welker compares this form to the framework of a 'moral market', where a community tries to regulate its further development and it's shaping of the world 'by the attribution or withdrawal of respect' (Welker 1994a:41).

He finds the root of this form to be what he refers to as 'Fortschrittsdenken', i.e. thought which has to do with the idea of progress or improvement (Welker 1992a:52). He explains this with the hypothesis that human beings, or a group of human beings, for example take part in a process that runs 'from bondage to freedom', insofar as these human beings, or the particular group, act 'in a certain way' (Welker 1994a:44).

For Welker this form of thought has become the most important of the forms unconsciously or consciously influencing thought on a theology of the Spirit. The reasons for this being that it 'allows very general and at the same time very specific statements to be made about the interconnection between God's action and human participation in that action' (Welker 1994a:45). He highlights that this form can relate to a theology of law[7] and also to pluralistic thought forms, both of which he finds to be important

6 Cf. also Welker (2004c:122–137).

7 Cf. Welker (1989; 1990; 1994b; 1998d; 2013).

for the developing of a theology of the Spirit. This form therefor shares the difficulties these forms of thought have in discerning the being and work of the Spirit, i.e. showing that justice, peace and freedom are in fact brought forth by *the Spirit*.

> To what extent is it the Holy Spirit who is at work in the imagined and initiated processes, and not a form of common sense, a form of moral sensibility, a normal measure of humanity and sympathy, or a simple feeling for right and wrong, for what engenders conflict and what prevents it, or for oppressive and liberating structures and forms of life? Or is the Holy Spirit only a way of expressing this sensibility, this humanity? Is it only an obfuscatory formula for this sensibility? Is it perhaps only an official title that is supposed to lend some emphasis to the concerns of the well-meaning and devout when the less well-meaning and devout do not take justice, peace and freedom as seriously and as scrupulously? (Welker 1994a:46)

Welker thus asks if there is a *reality* of the Spirit. His 'realistic theology' is an attempt precisely to answer this question without a return to the above-mentioned forms of thought. What does this 'realistic theology' mean?

6. A 'realistic theology', *firstly,* is for Welker a theology that is concerned with the biblical traditions. In the light of the historical weight it became clear that for him these traditions grew from what was gathered and compared, giving rise to diverse testimonies. It became clear that for Welker it is important to take these testimonies' different settings in life seriously, i.e. testimonies that sometimes appear to be in conflict or incompatible with each other and sometimes are in conflict or simply incompatible with each other. It furthermore became clear that it is through these human testimonies that God is found to be revealed, i.e. human testimonies that are 'endangered by obstruction, error, and lies' (Welker 1994a:47). With his realistic hermeneutic Welker emphasises that no human experience are in control of 'God *as such'* (Welker 1994a:46).

In the light of the theological weight of the biblical traditions it become clear that these testimonies that appear to be in conflict and often are in conflict are able to mutually question and strengthen each other, giving rise to the cultural weight, which describes the 'Wirkungsgeschichte', i.e. a history of effects of the biblical traditions since canonization, indicating

how these traditions, even today, have an enormous impact on the most diverse settings in life.

Welker sees his 'realistic theology' *secondly* as a theology that constantly surveys past, present and future testimonies of God and tests them for interrelations and also for differences (Welker 1992a:55). Here again it is important to grasp that in his theology a sensitivity for differences are just as important as the interrelations (Welker 1986:5). He therefor finds the biblical traditions to have its 'sachliche Grundlage', its relevant basis here, i.e. in the fact that this collection of differentiated and complex testimonies to God 'has been tested in a diversity of ways for authenticity, continuity, and fruitfulness of differences' (Welker 1994a:47). This became particularly clear in Welker's description of the canonical weight of the biblical traditions that alludes to the coherence of these traditions, in that they refer to each other, learn from each other, criticise each other, and strengthen each other, leading to what Welker calls a canonical memory.

Precisely by concentrating on both the interrelations and the differences that he finds primarily in the testimonies of the biblical traditions and only secondarily in the testimonies in different cultures, a 'realistic theology', *thirdly,* is a theology that 'wants to let the experienced and expected *reality* of God come forward in ever-new ways' (Welker 1994a:47). In an interview at the occasion of receiving an honorary doctorate from the North-West University in Potchefstroom, he highlighted that he is interested in theology that deals with the crucial topics of faith. He wants, however, to 'translate them into contemporary contexts and developed forms of thought that moves out of conventional monistic and dualistic thinking', i.e. forms of thought with an 'adequate complexity'.[8]

This is particularly clear in Welker's *interdisciplinary*[9] conversations with natural sciences,[10] economy,[11] law,[12] anthropology,[13] and philosophy[14]. Here

8 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZslNcDuI9Hk

9 Cf. e.g. Welker (2012b; 2014b).

10 Cf. e.g. Polkinghorne and Welker (2000).

11 Cf. e.g. Von Hagen and Welker (2014).

12 Cf. e.g. Etzelmüller and Welker (2013).

13 Cf. e.g. Welker (2014c).

14 Cf. e.g. Welker (2006; 2012c).

he has through the years attempted to let the reality of God come forward precisely by bringing biblical perspectives in conversation with appropriate contemporary questions.

In the light of the above description of the polemical forms of thought against which Welker develops his theology of the Spirit what he means with a 'realistic theology' becomes particularly clear.

In terms of metaphysical 'totalisation' Welker's 'realistic theology' means that the being and work of the Spirit cannot be understood in a single 'Bezugsystem', i.e. *a* system of reference. The Spirit works neither only in 'our' 'Lebenszusammenhängen' or life relations nor in abstract simplifications of these life relations (Welker 1992a:55). He thus underlines that the Spirit does not fit into metaphysical constructs that human beings have made up to fit their life relations or the particular perspectives these life relations create (Welker 1994a:47). In contrast to the metaphysical form of thought Welker's 'realistic theology' wants to understand the being and work of the Spirit in a *plurality* of life relations and the contexts of these life relations (Welker 1992a:55). In his theology of the Spirit Welker is concerned precisely with the 'criteria of the coherence and clarity' of the experience and knowledge of the Spirit in this plurality of life relations.

In relation to a dialogical approach a 'realistic theology' means that the being and work of the Spirit cannot be understood in individually made up ideas of intimacy and the concepts that emanates from these made up ideas (Welker 1992a:55). Here he also criticises the attempt to broaden the 'I-Thou' form or bettering it by contrasting it with the 'subject-object' form of thought, i.e. with oversimplified conceptions of objectivity (Welker 1994a:48). It is for Welker of the utmost importance that it is realised that even the most elementary idea of the world cannot be understood and reconstructed 'by means of person-to-person relations, or by contrasting such relations with those between a person and an object of perception' (Welker 1994a:48). With his 'realistic theology' he thus wants to move past the two-sided patterns of 'God' and 'the human person'.

In relation to social moralism his 'realistic theology' means that the being and work of the Spirit cannot be understood with a frame of thought characterised by the constitution of a moral market (Welker 1994a:48). He makes it clear that a 'realistic theology' is conscious of the fact that 'even

the highest and most noble experiences, goals, and conceptions of value can be corrupted' (Welker 1992a:56).

7. With his realistic theology of the Spirit Welker thus wants to reject what he calls 'einen kontrollsüchtigen theologischen Reduktionismus', a reductionism that is addicted to theological control and is advanced by these metaphysical, dialogical and moralistic forms of thought (Welker 1992a:57). These forms of thought, however, will for him only be renounced when 'the very content that they are attempting to comprehend does away with them' (Welker 1994a:49).

This is then what Welker endeavours to do in his theology.

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