Stellenbosch Theological Journal 2026, Vol 12, No 1, 1–22
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.17570/stj.2026.v12n1.a16
Online ISSN 2413-9467 | Print ISSN 2413-9459
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Knowledge beyond academia? A case study using the interview as a research genre for Systematic Theology

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Abstract

The academic work of theologians rests on types of knowledge not always explicit in their texts. In this article, I analyse an interview with the late South African theologian Klaus Nürnberger to highlight these types of knowledge. By contrasting the contribution of the interview with the knowledge available in Nürnberger's published works, I show how the interview adds to the knowledge base surrounding Nürnberger's academic work. I find that the value found in the interview was: (i) limited though still useful clarifications of his academic work; (ii) capturing some of Nürnberger's orality; (iii) imparted wisdom from costly life choices; (iv) intensely personal background and motivation to his work as a philosopher and theologian; and (v) as a training ground for young theologians.

Keywords

knowledge; interview; Klaus Nürnberger; orality; systematic theology

Introduction

"Every time an old man dies in Africa, it is as if a library has burnt down." This oft-repeated saying by Amadou Hampâté Bâ (2024) expresses the loss of oral types of knowledge when elders pass on. This was the case for the Lutheran faith communities in Southern Africa when theologian Klaus Nürnberger passed away in 2022. The loss of him as a person was felt by many, but those engaged with his work sensed a loss of knowledge as well.

Despite the large number of academic publications he left behind, it was still "as if a library had burnt down". This raised the following question: What kind(s) of knowledge do we regard as important for theology that is not contained in academic books and articles?[1]

In this article I respond to this question by contrasting the knowledge contained in my final interview with Nürnberger (Lange 2021) against the knowledge contained in his published works. In doing so, I expect to be able to sketch (some) contours of the kind of knowledge that is valuable for (systematic) theology although not contained in "standard" academic material. Consequently, this article engages the question of the (systematic) theological archive[2] and seeks to contribute to the critical discourse around knowledge production.[3] I shall begin with an outline of the motivation and the method of the interview, and then turn to a close analysis of its content with reference to Nürnberger's published works.

Why and how to interview? Motivation and method

The interview with Nürnberger arose from various factors. Firstly, early on in my theological studies, I sought ways to learn from him and to engage his theology. Although many of his books were available to me, questions arose while reading them that were not directly addressed by the text. Some of these questions also related to topics not covered by his theology *per se*, or at least not explicitly. In some ways, this interview therefore presents a form of inter-generational dialogue.[4] Moreover, I also hoped to introduce Nürnberger to my fellow theology students, as well as pay tribute to his contribution to South African theology. Another factor that motivated

1 This strongly resonates with the critique of the theological academy by de Beer (2026).

2 In a previous article (Lange 2023) I have pointed to gaps in archival theory, some of which can be addressed by Schankweiler's (2025) take on the archive and the affect.

3 See, for example, Veldsman's (2026) critique of the conventional approach – or road – to knowledge production: "The road mostly travelled is the very road on which "objectivity" and "rationality" are methodologically pursued and "subjectivity" and "emotional irrationality" are to be curtailed or eliminated to the best of our methodological abilities, but mostly with the ironic or dubious outcome that they sophisticatedly and innocently (?) cover, hide or mask (their own) deep subjectivity."

4 More dialogical but similar in spirit to the book edited by Henco van der Westhuizen (2022).

the interview was my desire to go beyond the official curriculum as more questions arose in my mind around faith and reason. Moreover, I hoped that this could be my first public contribution in the field of theology. After consultation with Prof. Dion Forster, this motivation was channelled into the Nürnberger interview.

Nürnberger's hearing had deteriorated such that phone calls were extremely difficult for his ears (and my voice). Therefore, I proposed to interview via email. He would receive the questions and reply to them in his own time. I attached the interview of Laubscher (2021)[5] with Prof. Nico Koopman as a template. He agreed to participate and wrote:

> *"[Ich] finde es eine gute Idee. Es würde meine eigene Arbeit noch einmal ein wenig in Erinnerung rufen."* [Own translation: [I] think it is a good idea. It would somewhat call my own work to mind] (Nürnberger, 2021).

Consequently, I set out to develop the topic for the interview based on the information available from his books and his personal website.[6] As such, the interview was an in-depth[7], semi-structured[8] interview. In the beginning part of the interview, I planned to engage with his person and biography. The idea was that this would provide the basis for the subsequent questions around his theology. Once all the questions had been developed, I sent them to him, received his responses, and published the interview.

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5 Laubscher has conducted several such interviews. See (Laubscher 2016, 2018a,b, 2019, 2021a,b, 2022a,b, 2023a,b, 2024, 2025).

6 Unfortunately, his website is no longer online.

7 In-depth interviews, typically using a semi-structured interview format, are one of the most common methods of qualitative data collection due to their versatility (Cook 2008: 423). The interviewer introduces a topic whereupon the exchange oscillates between the interviewee's responses and the further probing by the interviewer. Consequently, the interviewer must be aware of which topics need to be covered for the study (Cook 2008: 422).

8 Semi-structured interviews are a combination of structured and unstructured interviews. They use a set of predetermined questions or topic ranges without a fixed range of responses. That is, the interviewer follows a specific list of topics or carefully worded questions which the interviewee is free to respond to in any way. Furthermore, the interviewer may probe the responses through follow-up questions or active listening (Ayres 2008: 810).

I was pleased with the positive feedback I received – from Nürnberger himself, some of his relatives, pastors from the Lutheran churches, and my peers – for this effort. One of my colleagues – Hermann Düvel – even drew extensively on this interview for his MDiv thesis. The interview thus provided a window into the life and work of Nürnberger to lay readers. However, did it introduce any new knowledge into the systematic theological archives? And if so, what kind of knowledge? This calls for an analysis.

Types of knowledge? Looking for value beyond academic knowledge

The analysis of the knowledge contained in the interview will follow the division into five topics: (a) Engaging Nürnberger's biography (pp. 1-6); (b) probing his approach to theology (pp. 7-14); (c) engaging specific examples (pp. 15-19); (d) probing contradictions (pp. 19-20); and (e) his view on the need to update theology (pp. 21-22). For topics (a) and (b), I begin (i) with a short literature review of the knowledge available on this topic in Nürnberger's published works. Then (ii) I introduce the questions of the interview and analyse them in terms of the knowledge gap they do or do not address. I then summarise and discuss Nürnberger's responses in terms of their contribution to filling the knowledge gap and/or their clarification of his existing body of work. In the remaining topics (c) to (e), I summarise his responses and conclude with a reflection on the nature of their contributions. The aim of this analysis is to determine which and what kind of knowledge the interview captured that was not already current in existing academic materials.

(a) Biographical knowledge?

(i) Biographical material of Nürnberger was available on his website and – most comprehensively – in the second volume of his *Faith in Christ Today*, which contains a concluding chapter inviting the reader to "Meet the Author" (Nürnberger 2016a: 519). In the former, Nürnberger begins with reflections on his person. This includes his view of himself as a "residual colonist" – a Westerner dropped in Africa by birth and entangled with Africa without his consent (Nürnberger 2022) – a place he loves and calls

home. He highlights (in bold font) his being a Christian – a Lutheran and ecumenist – and a theologian – one with a background in economics and the natural sciences. This section of his website also outlines his life story, from his birth on 28 January 1933, to his calling as a missionary, his marriage to Margarete Sieburg, their time in Germany, his further education, as well as his consequent service to church, society, and academy in his later life.

The latter presents an extensive life story focusing on Nürnberger's academic work. The purpose of this chapter in his systematic theology is that:

> No author fell ready-made from heaven. Every work reflects a particular but changing cultural situation. Every insight has a history. In our postmodern times, authors are expected to account for their embeddedness in the rapidly changing fabric of a globalising world. […] I simply highlight some of the encounters and experiences that made me think the way I do (Nürnberger 2016a: 519).

His life story – section I of this chapter – is therefore short and only lists what is relevant for his work: His birth and upbringing, his struggle to choose between farming and missionary work, his studies in economic development, and his switch to theology. Section II recounts Nürnberger's theological formation. He studied under Carl Heinz Ratschow, a scholar of the Luther Renaissance, who steered Nürnberger toward a PhD on Karl Barth. This section also recounts various crises of faith, e.g. when Nürnberger encountered the work of Feuerbach. At that time, German theology was largely dialectical and existentialist. Through the work of Moltmann and Pannenberg, these constraints were broken, regaining the "comprehensiveness of Christian hope [and] the historical dimensions of the biblical faith" (Nürnberger, 2016a: 528).

Section III – another short section – recounts the beginning of Nürnberger's work as a missionary in the Northern Limpopo Province, after he had contemplated but chosen not to pursue a career at a German university. They worked there for only two years. According to Nürnberger:

> It was an ideal situation to experience the cultural, political and economic situation of rural African communities at the time. It opened an entirely new world for us. But it was also painful and

> humiliating to experience. We had always thought that having grown up with blacks, we knew at least slightly more about African realities than our contemporaries in Europe. But here we were reduced from the educated and informed to the ignorant and bewildered, from those who felt called to teach, to those who had to learn (Nürnberger 2016a: 529).

Section IV describes Nürnberger's time at the Lutheran Theological College in Maphumulo, KZN. Here he wrote his first work, the Afrikaans *Sistematiese Teologie*. However, this time also saw Nürnberger confronted with the Black Consciousness Movement, along with the emerging Liberation and Black theologies. This was a challenging time, as Nürnberger – as the white lecturer – was seen as the very problem. The "Missionary, go home!" cry affected him as well: "The prospect of no longer being needed at the peak of my life […] became a potential reality" (Nürnberger 2016a: 533).

Section V outlines his call to a chair in systematic theology at Bochum University, Germany. However, Nürnberger turned this down for the post of Theological Ethics at the University of South Africa (Unisa). The vacancy of this position at Unisa was "a miracle of God" for Nürnberger. Not long after his appointment, he was invited to visit Latin America and further engaged with Liberation Theology. The section further outlines the escalation in South Africa in 1979. He became part of the "National Initiative for Reconciliation" (NIR), which was soon overshadowed and rejected by the appearance of the much more radical *Kairos Document*. With that,

> [t]he NIR was practically dead, although some regional groups continued. […] Did we sympathise with the system? The documentation proves otherwise. What made us different was that we believed that the agonising personal and communal encounter between black and white Christians, rather than head-on confrontation, had the potential of leading to common insight and common commitment (Nürnberger, 2016a: 538).

The next section of Nürnberger's life started with the establishment of the ecumenical training facility in Pietermaritzburg of the black and white Lutheran churches. Having helped there as a guest lecturer, Nürnberger applied for the position and was appointed. Although the department was

much smaller and very young, Nürnberger enjoyed having the students in front of him again. He also saw the transition to the new South Africa and the democratic election of Mandela in this context:

> I keenly remember that in the evening of [that day], I experienced an immense psychological release from a burden that had sat on me ever since I was confronted with the political, economic and social realities of South Africa during my studies in the 1950s. At last we could breathe again (Nürnberger 2016a: 541).

For thirty years he had looked at economic discrepancies, investigating their origin and its legitimating ideology. He describes this work as a "cry in the wilderness". Consequently, he turned to other research interests, focusing on the evolutionary trajectory of the biblical tradition.

The final section recounts Nürnberger's retirement: The "opportunity to do my thing". He worked on the discussions around the 1999 joint declaration of the doctrine of justification, on the church's response to the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and a modernised presentation of Luther's theology. He particularly took up the challenge of Dawkins's *God Delusion* and wrote a "repentant refutation". He further investigated the topic of faith and science, and – in 2016 – had still other works in the pipeline.

(ii) With the above knowledge around Nürnberger's biography being available, the interview further delved into biographical aspects. It begins with a short and condensed curriculum vitae. All the information presented here is a mere summation of the website information (after consulting his CV), which serves as an overall introduction to the reader. The first question of the interview departs from the stance quoted earlier, that "No author fell ready-made from heaven". Having consulted his life story, both on the website and in his 2016 work, I could not help noticing that the choices Nürnberger made in his life had radical consequences and costs. Therefore, I hoped to find out from him how he dealt with these sacrifices. How he personally viewed these did not emerge from the texts. In response to this question, Nürnberger clarifies that framing these consequences, costs and sacrifices is not appropriate. According to him, he "lost nothing and gained everything" in the process. He granted that the decisions were painful at the time, but better in the long run.

The next question I posed to Nürnberger dealt with the "burden of belonging to the perpetrators". As a white male student at Stellenbosch University, I repeatedly had to reflect on my positionality. Although I also grew up with blacks and had made "costly life choices myself", I nevertheless wondered how Nürnberger dealt with his burden of privilege. Of course, he does touch on this topic during his time at the Lutheran Theological College (Section IV of his life), and how difficult it was for him. In his response to this question, Nürnberger repeats much of the material present in his life story. However, what does seem to be new information are some retrospective reflections:

> I also realised after a time that my black students and colleagues did not really want to get rid of us. In fact, they may have needed us as "sparring partners" to develop their own strengths. At any rate, the most difficult students later became the closest companions (Lange, 2021: 4.

Moreover, Nürnberger ends his response with lessons that he has learned in the process, which are not noted anywhere else:

> (a) A condescending attitude, however well-intentioned, humiliates rather than empowers the recipients and is, therefore, instinctively rejected. Vertical relationships (between superior and subordinate) must change into horizontal relationships (between equals). (b) Never assume that you know better what is good for other people's lives than they know themselves and never try to solve problems for them without them. (c) When a clash of cultures is inevitable, be humble enough to realise you may be part of the problem rather than the solution. (d) Be prepared for failures and disappointments – they are part of the cost of getting involved in such situations (Lange 2021: 4–5).

Since the previous question had focused on how he dealt with his burden of privilege, I then turned to ask how he would advise other people to deal with similar burdens. Implicitly, I was asking him what advice he could give to me and my generation. He responded with the advice that "one must be open to face realities and the insights they generate as they come, however painful they may be" (Lange 2021: 5). This does not present a new insight as such but rather reflects much of the bedrock of his work. In the

next question, I asked him why he remained in Africa when he had career prospects in Germany. Similarly, his response revealed some of his deepest motivations:

> When I got involved with some extraordinary missionaries in the Pretoria area, I felt a calling to serve as a missionary. […] it had much to do with the realisation that I was highly and undeservedly privileged, which implied the responsibility of using my gifts to serve the less privileged (Lange 2021: 5).

The final question dealing with the person of Nürnberger – reflecting on the wide array of themes and theological disciplines that Nürnberger wrote on – moved the focus to his post-retirement work. I closed the biographical part with the question of whether he is still working on any projects. He noted that

> The most important issue after my retirement was the interface between faith and science and its relevance for the economic-ecological crisis towards which we are heading. With this I am not done yet. Most recently, however, I wrote a 380-page biography of my parents in the dramatic and tragic first half of the 20th century.[9] It was an incredibly deep-going experience (Lange 2021: 6).

(b) Approach to Theology?

(i) Next, the interview turned to Nürnberger's approach to theology. He has widely written on this topic. He outlines his choice of approach in his first Volume of *Faith in Christ today* (Nürnberger 2016b: 17–25) and, more fundamentally, outlines the core assumptions of this work in a 2018 article (c.f. Nürnberger 2018). In the latter, he describes the task of theology as follows:

> I take it that the task of theology is to facilitate and empower the proclamation and enactment of the "Word of God" in changing situations and contexts. It has a missionary, redemptive and transformative agenda (Nürnberger 2018: 2).

This "Word of God" is not a timeless truth for him. Instead:

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9 This book is unfortunately only available for relatives of the Nürnberger family and explicitly not for academic use.

> All concrete formulations of the Word of God, whether biblical or contemporary, are contextualisations. Theology must retrieve the intended meaning of a text from its ancient packaging and recast it in a contemporary idiom. We have to "become a Jew to the Jews and all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:18–23) (Nürnberger 2018: 2).

The audience he has in mind for his theology is "one informed to lesser or greater degrees by modern scientific insight" (Nürnberger 2018: 2). However, he approaches modern scientific insight from a theological perspective, since his "theology integrates three of the most basic and plausible scientific theories of today" (Nürnberger, 2018: 4) and not vice versa. These theories are the theory of emergence, the theory of cosmic evolution, and the law of entropy. Nürnberger therefore rejects conceptual realism for experiential realism – the approach of the natural sciences.

Experiential realism, incorporating the above scientific theories, is based on three assumptions:

- Anything outside of immanent reality should be ignored, e.g. anything supernatural, speculative metaphysics, or idealist constructions. The issue of transcendence should be left open or denied (i.e. agnosticism or naturalism).
- Immanent reality is objectively real. This is against the post-modern deconstructionist turn and its epistemological scepticism. Moreover, science leads to a better comprehension of this reality.
- "Reality is driven by an evolutionary and differentiating dynamic that proceeds in "emergent" levels of complexity. Each higher level is constituted by a network of lower level constituents with its own set of characteristics and regularities" (Nürnberger, 2020: 41).

In this naturalist framework, Nürnberger's approach to theology hinges on the theory of emergence. It is pivotal for his work, as it encompasses and connects

> the whole of reality from energy fields, quanta, atoms and molecules, Newtonian physics, biological and neurological phenomena to spiritual and social processes. Levels are causally linked with multiple feedback loops across the system. All levels are equally real. Where accessible, they can be observed, analysed, described, and

> critiqued. Even hallucinations can be in the synaptic networks in the brain. They have real consequences in this world. To deny them reality is reductionist" (Nürnberger, 2020: 41).

(ii) With the above in mind, the first question of the interview touching on Nürnberger's theological approach (see (Lange 2021: 6–7) arose from reading responses to his work. I came across Conradie's (2018: 3) comment that the natural sciences are Nürnberger's first love. Seeking to clarify this, I posed to him the question regarding his "first love": natural science or theology. His response unambiguously affirms the primacy of the biblical faith. This is also confirmed by the perspective on his engagement with the sciences and their modern insight mentioned earlier. No new information is obtained in this regard, but the contradictory statements are clarified.

After a short question regarding the relations of the distinctions between the benevolent intentionality and creative power of God, and the Lutheran distinction between Law and Gospel, I then query the experiential realist approach that underlies Nürnberger's work. It might seem unnecessary to query an assumption that has received much attention from him. However, the claim that theology *must* follow experiential realism to be plausible and credible (Nürnberger 2018: 3) is a rejection of much contemporary theology. Consequently, a closer look at this assumption in the interview is well justified. Moreover, its presentation as a continuing engagement presents a useful summary of his concepts and how they are related. This is done in a number of questions following each other: I ask him why a theology *must* follow an experiential realist approach, how it relates to Luther's experiential approach, and how far he has taken this approach. Thereafter, I probe the three assumptions that underlie experiential realism, each in a separate question (Lange 2021: 8–13).

Nürnberger's response to the question of why theology *must* follow experiential realism begins with an outline of the "dramatic" changes and advances in science and technology that have taken place since the composition of the Reformation documents, the classical doctrinal formulations, and especially the biblical documents. Moreover, under the scrutiny of the Enlightenment dogma – empiricism and rationalism – the means of communication in the Bible lose their traction. The fiction, parables, myths, legends, and miracle stories are difficult to accept by a

population "clued up by science and technology". These might have been "appropriate at the time, but they have become quite indigestible even for the average believer, let alone for our secularised contemporaries" (Lange 2021: 9). He concludes the response to the question with two examples, showing how Christology and the Trinity become more intelligible once the "valid intentions underlying these formulations in terms of the experiences of a living faith" (Lange, 2021: 9) have been unearthed.

The relation of Nürnberger's experiential realism to Luther's experiential approach is next clarified by Nürnberger. He did not derive the former from the latter. Luther's theology appealed to him because of the more inductive bent as opposed to a deductive approach:

> [I]n his theology, Luther analysed and articulated (spiritual) experiences rather than engaging in purely dogmatic argument; it appealed to me more than a theology based on unsupported postulates, such as an inerrant Bible, an orthodox doctrine, or an infallible pope (Lange 2021: 10).

My next question sought to clarify how far Nürnberger took experiential realism. How could he advocate agnosticism or naturalism as a Christian theologian? What did "faith" mean to him? Interestingly, Nürnberger took this approach "all the way":

> I found that I could do that without losing my faith when I realised that the transcendent God is not accessible to us as such but only through his immanent manifestations: God's creative power is identical with the process of cosmic evolution as explored by the natural and historical sciences. God's benevolence is experienced through the impact of the Gospel on our consciousness. We can accept these immanent manifestations because this is the way in which the transcendent God discloses his creative power and his benevolent intentionality to us (Lange 2021: 10).

This approach stoked within Nürnberger a curiosity about how God goes about achieving these manifestations. Again, he rejects the idealist approach to theology which focused on perfection rather than on the reality available to us. This approach has "misled theology into unsustainable formulations" (Lange 2021: 10).

The scrutiny of the three core assumptions of experiential realism – outlined earlier – was the focus of the next three answers and responses. My first query challenged the notion of leaving the issue of transcendence open: Can there be faith without transcendence? In his response, he clarified that science must exclude the transcendent since it has no way of investigating it. However, he goes on to note that even theology and faith have no access to the transcendent either! We can only access its manifestations within immanent reality. The assurance or intuition of faith is itself based on existential experiences of immanent reality. These experiences are then responded to in the proclamation of God's Word. Moreover, the proclamation of God's Word is also a tradition that has evolved within immanent reality:

> Our intuitions, notions, and concepts of God themselves belong to immanent reality. They can be analysed, critiqued, changed, or abandoned; otherwise, theology would make no sense. The task of theology is to find the most appropriate and the most accessible concept of God possible under current circumstances and worldview assumptions (Lange 2021: 11).

The query of the second core assumption relates to the contradiction whether "the insistence that "immanent reality is objectively real" is not itself a metaphysical speculation" (Lange 2021: 11), a speculation this assumption rejects. Nürnberger completely rejects the idea of such a contradiction. He concedes that all insight is perspectival and partial but insists that objects exist. He leads this justification with an intensely personal statement: "That my deceased wife is no longer with me is a painful fact, not an illusion that I must get out of my head" (Lange 2021: 11).

The final core assumption – applauded by De Gruchy (2017: 207) in his review of Nürnberger's *Faith in Christ Today* – relates to the theory of emergence. This theory, as noted earlier, encompasses all of reality, including spiritual phenomena. My question was therefore whether one can scientifically analyse all spiritual phenomena. Nürnberger responded that it is in principle possible, but such an investigation is limited due to practical difficulties. This is due to the complexity and contingency which grows exponentially across the different levels of emergence:

> At the physical level, when two cars crash, the likely result can be predicted fairly easily with the help of the parallelogram of forces. At the biological level, the task is vastly more difficult. What happens at the spiritual level through the interaction of billions of neurons in our brain is, due to a vastly increased complexity and contingency at that level, largely beyond analysis and prediction (Lange 2021: 13).

I consequently query what the significance of this theory is for theology. For Nürnberger, this theory proves that spirituality is an empirical reality and removes the stigma around worldview assumptions. While Godself does not exist, conceptions and intuitions of God exist objectively. Moreover, they have consequences and must be taken seriously: He highlights this seriousness by contrasting the faith and consequences of Hitler and of Mother Theresa. In emergence theory, faith therefore moves from a non-issue to being a real issue (Lange 2021: 14).

The final question relating to Nürnberger's theological approach queries whether the theory of emergence does not fail to address human self-understanding / consciousness. He fully denies this, stating that the theory of emergence does the exact opposite and integrates consciousness, locating it "at the mental or spiritual level, which presupposes the neurological level" (Lange 2021: 14).

The interview does not add any new "scholarly" information that would not otherwise be available in Nürnberger's works. However, it does clarify some concepts in his approach to theology, for example, the primacy of faith versus science. Moreover, it connects Nürnberger's theological approach to his life, showing, for example, how deep the pain of his wife's passing and absence is for him and how this pain roots him in objective reality. It also reveals some of Nürnberger's personal struggles and contending with faith: Realising that the transcendent was not accessible in any way, he did not lose faith but gained it through his experiential realist approach. Additionally, the presentation of this knowledge in this form and composition does present a "summary" of Nürnberger's worldview – an ideal introduction for students of his work.

(c) Engaging specific examples?

It was straightforward to review the existing literature for the subsections (a) and (b) above to analyse the knowledge contained in the interview responses. In this section, a few examples are targeted. It is way beyond the scope of this study to review *all* examples Nürnberger ever used in his works, especially since he uses these examples to illustrate the principles of his approach outlined in the previous section. Therefore, I shall only present a summary of this section and contrast it an appropriate reflection of his theology.

Beginning with a contextualization of theology within the theory of emergence, Nürnberger touches on the way that science replaces untenable theories in favour of integrating new valid insights. This process – painful and often resisted – is incredibly difficult in theology due to the "foundational character of religious commitments" (Lange, 2021: 15). This requires a delicate balance in congregations between conservative and more critical parishioners. The process of moving to a "decluttered and aligned" faith must be gradual and careful. He goes on to use examples of this process (Lange 2021: 15):

- *Creation:* God's creative power is identical with the driving force of evolution. Scientific insight rather than ancient worldviews will give clues to the origin of the universe.
- *Concept of God:* Traditional theism over-personalises reality by reducing God to the personal. However, God's laws are also nature's laws, including those causing tsunamis.
- *Anthropology:* The body-soul dualism of Plato is not tenable anymore, considering the "soul's" dependence on the biological and neurological aspects of the body. The human is an indivisible whole.
- *Eschatology:* The apocalyptic expectation of a "perfect" world "to come" is untenable in lieu of cosmic evolution processes. What can be redeemed from this model is the intention between "what is" and "what ought to be". According to Nürnberger, this is better expressed as God's vision of "comprehensive optimal wellbeing" (Lange 2021: 16.

To ensure there is no residual dualism in his thinking, I next asked how he would contextualise the ascension and reign of Christ. For this, Nürnberger draws on the original context of the time and draws from it the intention that "[t]he "risen Christ" is not the revitalisation or reconstitution of a corpse. Rather, he represents a "new way of being human in fellowship with a loving God in which we are called to participate" (Lange, 2021: 17). Probing further the "location" or experience of Christ, Nürnberger located the Spirit of Christ living in us in the level of emergence of the spiritual. There, it is contending with other spirits such as the spirit of Hitler's fascism. (But note that even this spirit is the result of God's creative power.)

The content of this section is not novel. However, it is useful in its illustration of how Nürnberger's theological approach is applied to theological concepts. Moreover, one senses the wisdom of an "older" theologian in dealing with church members in his caution regarding the best way to "update" theological understanding in churches. Nürnberger had variously been involved in revising theology for his time and a specific people, and he encountered resistance. For the careful student, this reading can be valuable wisdom in preparation for public engagement.

(d) Probing contradictions?

During the interview preparations, I came across (what seemed to be) contradictions. I shall deal with them individually. First, it was not clear what Nürnberger meant by the distinction between the true and the empirical church (Nürnberger, 2016b: 257). Moreover, American theologian Ted Peters also questioned this distinction since such has fed schismatic impulses in the church's history before. However, Nürnberger clarifies that the empirical church is the existing church, and that the true church is the church that ought to exist. He keeps this distinction, calling any alternative sectarian rather than Protestant.

The next contradiction was that Nürnberger's doctrine on the unity of the church is based not on doctrinal consensus but on God's suffering acceptance of the unacceptable (Nürnberger 2018: 6). However, if one grants that "God's suffering acceptance of the unacceptable" is a doctrine, then Nürnberger opened himself up to a contradiction. He solves this contradiction (after a historical analysis) by focusing on *participation* rather than assent to doctrine:

> Unity cannot be reached through an artificial harmonisation of these different positions, or a reduction to the most basic common denominator, because that would only produce new versions that would again not be approved by all parties. Unity can only be reached when each partner participates in God's suffering acceptance of the unacceptable. Under the canopy of divine and mutual acceptance, they can then struggle for greater approximations to the most appropriate formulations in love (Lange 2021: 20).

In a similar fashion, I inquired into Nürnberger's dynamic conception of truth. He states that God's Word cannot be confined to a static doctrinal system (Nürnberger 2016b: 435). However, if he states this in his systematic theology, does he not confine this definition to another – his own – doctrinal system? He responds by framing systematic theology not as "eternally valid" formulations, but as a systematic and disciplined thinking through "the implications of the gospel as a dynamic and transformative message changing in response to changing situations and different dimensions of life" (Lange 2021: 21). In essence, he draws on Paul's distinction between the "letter" and the "spirit".

Like the previous section, little to no new substantive material is introduced that is not available in Nürnberger's works. However, it does approach his work from a critical perspective, challenging Nürnberger on some of his theology and adding texture to his approach. His responses always draw on basic wisdom and/or insight, either from a historical perspective or theological engagement or even basic biblical texts. This provides context for the parts of his work that I engaged with, and textures the perspective from which he wrote.

(e) Updating theology?

The final question I put to Nürnberger related to the updating of Christian theology. He engaged this in the context of his book *The Living Dead and the Living God: Christ and the Ancestors in a changing Africa* (Nürnberger 2007). However, my question was framed in the context of Elon Musk's endeavour to colonise Mars and his vision of a multi-planetary human species. Nürnberger rejected the idea that this is the kind of updating that theology needs, but that updating means to "catch up with current insight

in the sciences, albeit in a critical way" (Lange 2021: 21). Part of the most pressing concerns for this "update" is the economic-ecological time bomb, and that increasingly, most aspects of life

> are based on selfish motivations: the acquisition of profit, financial power, status and the immediate and lavish satisfaction of personal whims and desires. We are skidding along seemingly self-propelled tendencies towards catastrophic outcomes rather than deliberately setting up beneficial targets and throwing in our weight to bring about change (Lange 2021: 22).

Finally, he fundamentally questions the endeavour of space travel and scathingly critiques the insanity of colonising Mars, as well as the concentration of wealth and power in a minuscule global elite. In his response, he begins with a theme present in his work – updating theology with the insights of science – and then touches on an aspect of his earlier work on economics and development (which this interview could not focus on). The remainder of his response regarding space travel does present new views and motivations not explicitly present in his works.

Contributions beyond academic knowledge?

What then did the interview with Nürnberger contribute to the discipline of systematic theology? There is little to no new "academic" information in the interview: What might be considered as "new" are only parts of the interview. The challenges of contradictions/paradoxes posed to Nürnberger in his works might be of interest to scholars. Also worth noting is the clarification of the contradiction with Conradie regarding his "first love", as well as his response to Ted Peters regarding an ecclesiological difference. The last thing I could note here is the "summary" worldview that the interview presents. However, these are also discussed elsewhere in his works.

The interview does, however, contribute other information. Firstly, it captures some of Nürnberger's orality. He freely uses his own logic and language to respond to the questions. His main aim is not to be "academic", but to communicate how he understands his work. In the questions themselves, he also highlighted aspects (italicisations in the interview)

which he thought were relevant to focus on. This, as well as the following observations, shed light on his oral theology. Second, the interview captured some of Nürnberger's wisdom. This wisdom can be summarised in the following lessons:

- Difficult students can become the closest companions.
- A condescending attitude humiliates. Vertical relationships must be changed to horizontal relationships
- Never assume you know better than other people's needs.
- Failures and disappointments are part of "getting involved".
- Advice for younger generation: Be open to new realities and insights, even if they are painful.

Third, the interview captures deep life experiences, which reveal some of his deepest motivations for his work. He tells of his calling to be a missionary and how it felt: He was highly and undeservedly privileged, which implied the responsibility of using his gifts to serve the less privileged. He also shares how painful the passing of his wife Maxi was, and how this pain rooted him in "objective reality". Moreover, the interview captures some of his personal struggles and how he contended with keeping faith, gaining it rather than losing it through his experiential realist approach. Thus, a strong connection between his life and his theology emerges. Fourth, the interview also presents Nürnberger's opinion on space travel as part of the human project.

Apart from the above, I particularly want to point out that the interview has specific value for students of theology (who read it carefully). Of course, the lessons from his wisdom are likely to prove fruitful if applied, but in the interview Nürnberger also challenges students with naturalism and/or agnosticism in the way he responds to the questions. This is a great "sparring ground" with Nürnberger for any student. Moreover, the method of responding to the questions is a useful way to approach issues students might have in theology: Nürnberger always draws on basic insights, historical perspectives, and theological analysis. Moreover, students can read between the lines how this older theologian has dealt with his calling to "update" theological understanding in churches. The expectation of resistance and pain presents (some) preparation for such a

public engagement. Finally, the interview also provides additional context and texture to the topics that are already discussed by him.

Conclusion

Clearly, the interview of Nürnberger captured some of the pages of the "library that burned down" when he passed on. As shown above, the value found in the interview was: (i) limited though still useful clarifications of his academic work, including Nürnberger's view on space travel; (ii) capturing some of Nürnberger's orality; (iii) imparted wisdom from costly life choices; (iv) intensely personal background and motivation to his work as a philosopher and theologian; and (v) as a training ground for young theologians. Consequently, this article demonstrates the importance of these kinds of knowledge that are usually not contained in academic theology. Additionally, it strengthens the importance of the link between the life and work of theologians. This also highlights the value that the interview as a research genre can offer the systematic theological archive, as exemplified by the many interviews published by Martin Laubscher.

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