

‘God the Spirit’ – Michael Welker’s ‘biblical-realistic theology’

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Abstract

The following essay attempts to offer a framework for Michael Welker’s ample theology of the Spirit by inquiring as to the impulses resonating from his *God the Spirit*. This is important because Welker’s entire theological endeavour is built upon the insights emanating from his theology of the Spirit. In the first part of the essay Welker’s theological hermeneutic with regards to the Spirit is made clear. The particular relation between the Spirit and Jesus Christ is explored in the second part of the essay. This relation is of importance in the light of his more recent *God the Revealed: Christology*. The work of the Spirit in the world is clarified in the third part of the essay. In the final part Welker’s conception of the Spirit is examined in light of the Apostolicum.

Keywords

Michael Welker, Spirit of God, Biblical traditions, pluralism, Christology.

Eine Theologie des Heiligen Geistes muß die Hegel und Aristoteles gemeinsame Fixierung auf die Einheit von steigerungsfähiger Selbstbeziehung, gedanklich disponierender Kontrolle und Wohlgefallen durchschauen. Sie muß deutlich machen, daß die in dieser Einheit faßbare, Person‘ des Geistes mit dem biblischen Überlieferungen bezeugten Geist Gottes kaum etwas gemeinsam hat. Sie muß aufklärend der Verkultung dieses Geistes und dem weltweit eingeschliffenen Respekt vor seiner Macht entgegenwirken. Sie tut dies sachgemäß und wirksam, indem sie die bestimmte Selbstlosigkeit des Geistes Gottes, die damit verbundene öffentliche

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Personalität, die damit verbundene Kraft und Wirksamkeit und die damit verbundene Rettung und Erneuerung der Welt erkennen hilft (Welker 1992a:273).

1. Introduction

In the light of the important role Michael Welker's *Gottes Geist: Theologie des Heiligen Geistes* plays in his more recent publication, *Gottes Offenbarung. Christologie* (2012a), translated by Douglas W. Stott into *God the Revealed: Christology* (2013a), it is imperative to rethink his weighty theology of the Spirit.

In the twenty years following the publication of his thought on the Spirit Welker has become one of the most important Reformed theologians in contemporary thought.²

His influence has not only been felt in Germany, as is clear in the *Festschriften* entitled *Resonanzen. Theologische Beiträge: Michael Welker 50. Geburtstag* (Brandt and Oberdorfer 1997), *Gegenwart des lebendigen Christus* (Schüle and Thomas 2007) and *Gottes Geist und menschlicher Geist* (Etzelmüller and Springhart 2013). He has also had an immense impact on theology worldwide. This is evident not only in the English *Festschrift* entitled *Who Is Jesus Christ for Us Today?: Pathways to Contemporary Christology* (Schüle and Thomas 2009), but in the way theologians from all parts of the world have been inspired by his fervour for a theology able to converse with the most diverse fields of thought.

What is most interesting of his theology, however, is what Jürgen Moltmann described as Welker's new way of doing biblical theology (Moltmann 2007:141).

It is therefore apt that an attempt is made to offer a framework for Welker's impressive theological endeavour. This attempt will be made by inquiring as to the impulses resonating from his *God the Spirit*, which pervades his entire theological effort.

2 Cf. Welker and Willis (1999); Welker and Alston (2003; 2007).

2. The seedbed of Welker's theology

1. Welker characterises his theology of the Holy Spirit, which might even be the first comprehensive *biblical* theology of the Spirit, as a realistic theology (Welker 1992a:13).³ The relation between the Spirit and the biblical traditions can be understood as the basis, the seedbed, on which Welker builds his realistic theology in general, and his theology of the Spirit in particular (Welker 2002a; 2003a; 2004a; 2006a).

2. For Welker, the biblical traditions, rather than any other extra-biblical texts,⁴ are the most important multi-perspectival testimony to God and God's Spirit.⁵ The reason for this emphasis is found in what he has often labelled the fourfold weight of the biblical traditions. The *historical* weight indicates how, over more than a millennium, these biblical traditions grew from what was gathered and compared, giving rise to a multiplicity of testimonies referring to a multi-contextual search for knowledge of God; the *cultural* weight describes the 'Wirkungsgeschichte' of the biblical traditions since canonisation, indicating how these traditions, even today, have an enormous impact on the most diverse 'Sitz im Leben'. The biblical traditions, however, does not merely contain an abundance of often contrasting testimonies. The *canonical* weight alludes to the coherence of these traditions that refer to each other, learn from each other, criticise each other, and strengthen each other, leading to what Welker calls living canonical memory.⁶ The fourfold weight, nevertheless, for Welker accrues

3 Welker has mentioned that, in principle, it would have been possible to characterise his theology as a 'biblical theology' or as 'postmodern' or rather 'late modern' theology. For him, however, the former is often too general and does not make his constructive and systematic concerns clear, while the latter, despite the fact that he employs relativistic forms of thought, is not able to adequately encapsulate the key concerns of his theological hermeneutic.

4 For Welker it is important to distinguish between the Word of God, which he finds to be in the biblical traditions, and the human word, which is constantly in need of the Spirit. Cf. e.g. Welker (1997a).

5 In their review, Volf and Thompson (1996:384), the authors ask why the Spirit works through these biblical texts, rather than other texts. Welker has, since then, written extensively on his understanding of the biblical traditions and has given precise theological answers to this question. Cf. e.g. Welker (2001:9ff.).

6 The biblical traditions allow for the interconnection between what Jan Assmann called 'warm' and 'cold' options of living cultural memory. On the one hand, a specific set of biblical texts limits cultural memory to the interpretation of these texts, on the other hand, these pluralistic traditions stimulate *ongoing* interpretation and reinterpretation

to the biblical traditions because of its content. The historical, cultural, and canonical weight of the biblical traditions is grounded in the *theological weight – the living God* (2002b:381).

3. In light of these dimensions of the biblical traditions – ‘das Wort Gottes, das Menschen erbaut, tröstet, aufrichtet, belebt, erfreut, stärkt, befreit, hoffen läßt, das ihnen Orientierung und Gewißheit gibt, das Wort Gottes, das sie aber auch in Frage stellt, erschreckt, bindet, bedrängt, mahnt, richtet’ (1996a:159-165) – it becomes comprehensible why the Spirit and the biblical traditions cannot be played off against each other, and why these traditions become virtually interchangeable with the Spirit.

The biblical traditions, on the one hand, give clearer differentiated contours to the working of the Spirit.⁷ The Spirit, on the other hand, gives life to these traditions, reflecting in a variegated way the fullness of God’s workings, making these living traditions recognisable as the *Word of God*. For Welker, it is therefore an absolute necessity to speak of the biblical traditions as inspired by God’s Spirit (1992a:253-258). The inspiration of these traditions, for him, not only means that the Spirit gathers a plurality of testimonies in ever-renewed ways so that they can reveal the workings of God. The Holy Spirit also enables these testimonies to speak out of different and heterogeneous contexts into different and heterogeneous contexts⁸ – evoking reactions and experiences to those workings of God.

without letting go of its basic thrust. This living canonical memory is brought forth by the Spirit, the power which continually renews, enriches, and revitalises this memory. Cf. Welker (1999:142; 2008:321ff.).

- 7 Welker (1992a) argues that the these contours of the Spirit becomes clearer as one moves from the early and unclear experiences of the Spirit’s power to the promised Spirit of justice and peace that rests on Jesus Christ, and is poured out.
- 8 In this sense the biblical traditions are of particular importance in pluralistic societies. Welker describes pluralistic societies as comprised out of what Niklas Luhmann called ‘functional systems’, meaning that these societies, that have a multi-systemic structure, cultivates the differentiation of specialized social systems that, while striving for autonomy and against interferences by other systems, performs a function that is essential for the whole society, and what Jürgen Habermas called ‘civil-society associations’, meaning that besides these systems, societies also develop a stabilizing realm of associations, that, while promoting their own interests, wants to make an impact on the whole by supporting or reshaping and changing the social systems. The deliberate cultivation of a three-fold set of differences – the differences between a multitude of functional systems, between a multitude of civil-society associations, and between functional systems and civil-society associations – what Welker often calls a complexly *structured* pluralism, can make the subtle balance of power, the

4. With this in mind it is possible to infer the polemic basis against which Welker develops his theology of the Spirit. For him it is only with great difficulty that the predominant forms of theological reflection, that have incapacitated theology and blocked them from their own contents and traditions, can grasp the Spirit that leads to knowledge of God (Welker 1992a:49). The Spirit cannot adequately be discerned in *metaphysical* forms of thought that abstractly utilises totalising, universal systems of reference to grasp the work of the Spirit. Nor can the Spirit be comprehended in *dialogical* forms of thought that constantly reduces the complex relations brought forth by the Spirit by using two-sided person to person thought forms, or by contrasting such relations with those between a person and an object of perception, where more complex relationships are mostly only implied. Finally, the Spirit cannot be distinguished in the framework of *moralistic* forms of thought that, with its attachment to the idea of progress, manage its further development by the ever-changing attribution or withdrawal of respect (Welker 1992a:50-57). For Welker, the renunciation of these forms can only be attained where *the content* that these forms are attempting to comprehend reform these forms of thought. This is what Welker endeavours to do with his realistic theological hermeneutic.

It is on this seedbed that Welker further develops his theology of the Spirit.

demanding 'regulation' of the 'circulation of powers', a possibility. The multicontextual and pluralistic constitution of the biblical canon offers a differentiated response to this pluralistic societal situation, enabling the establishment of what Welker has called fruitful relations between the pluralistic canonical traditions on the one hand, and pluralistic contexts on the other hand. Cf. Welker (2000a:232 ff.; 2001b:89ff.; 2002b:389).

3. The selfless Spirit: The Spirit and Christ

5. The Holy Spirit, other than the influential self-referential concept of spirit developed by Aristotle,⁹ is characterised by its specific selflessness¹⁰ as the Spirit of Jesus Christ. For Welker this means that *Christ embodies the Spirit*.

The Spirit, who rests on the promised bearer and powerless person of Jesus (Welker 1992a:207, 310),¹¹ is the power that publicly installs *Jesus as the Christ*.¹² The question, however, is how the Spirit's power can concretely be made present, be embodied, in this one person, Jesus Christ? For Welker, precisely in *this* person, a power becomes discernible that not only calls into question and removes one-sided, monocentric, and one-dimensional forms of power, but exercises a real effect in the most diverse life relations, the fullness of which cannot be taken in from any one perspective (Welker

9 It is not without good reason that, when wrestling with concepts of 'spirit', Welker turns to the philosopher, Aristotle. For him, it is of absolute necessity that the Holy Spirit is distinguished from Aristotle's influential concept of spirit that, with the capacity to exercise the greatest conceivable power, nevertheless, 'exhibits another constitution, other interests, other goals, and other power structures than the Spirit of God'. Aristotle comprehended *thought which thinks itself* as the highest point of concreteness and certainty, and identified this concrete and certain self-relation as 'the activity of spirit' and as 'the divine'. Although he thought the activity of spirit to pass through self-distancing, disengaging itself from a merely latent continuity with itself, spirit nevertheless attains only what 'is its own and what it has appropriated in thought'. Cf. Welker (1992a:262-267; 2006b:222).

10 Welker is aware of the fact that talk of a numinous 'Spirit of Christ' and the related notion of the 'selflessness of the Spirit' can degenerate into the rationalization of diverse relations of domination and forms of structural vehemence that, without protection against misleading abstractions, can and have been misused. Cf. Welker (2011a:179 ff.; 2011b:239; 2011c:73ff.) and Ford (1996:483ff.).

11 Welker often describes Jesus Christ as without the public means of power, who claims nothing for himself and who does not want to acquire any power *for himself*.

12 That the Spirit publicly installs the Christ is not indisputable. It might in fact seem as if the work of the Spirit can be connected precisely with an exclusion of the public sphere. For Welker, however, the Spirit publicly installs the Christ: at his *birth*, when, in the light of the Old Testament traditions, it is realized that Jesus is universally installed in publics that surpasses his own time, concretizing the fulfilment of the expectations of persons of all times and people; at his *temptation*, when, even beyond human publics, it is realized that the Spirit installs Jesus in a public characterised by the presence of other, even 'other-worldly', beings; and at his *baptism*, when it is recognized that this Jesus is installed as the Christ, the one on whom the Spirit rests. Cf. Welker (1992a:176-184).

1992a:175).¹³ In terms of the relation between the Spirit and Christ it is important for him, on the one hand, to recognise the consciously selfless and also self-withdrawing traits of this bearer of the Spirit (Welker 1992a:207, 285, 305, 310),¹⁴ grounded precisely in the action of the Spirit. On the other hand, talk of the Spirit's power and public recognisability before his crucifixion and resurrection necessarily needs to be guarded.¹⁵ How, then, is the relation between the Spirit and the resurrected and crucified Christ to be conceived?

6. The relation between the Spirit and the resurrected Christ is of central significance in Welker's thought (Welker 2000b:91ff.).¹⁶ The Spirit is the *Spirit of the resurrected Christ*. Welker wants to make sense of the real¹⁷ presence of the Resurrected through what he has often called a 'spiritual body' (Welker 2010a:349ff), i.e. through a differentiated conception of the relation between 'Spirit' and 'body'.

In order, however, to understand what is meant by these loaded concepts it is for him of the utmost importance to realise that the resurrection is not what has been considered to be resuscitation.¹⁸ The biblical traditions,

13 It is of significance to note that Welker wants to understand this person in what he has often called the fourfold multicontextuality of the historical Jesus. The first multicontextuality, the life of Jesus, is recognized in the second multicontextuality, the biblical and extra-biblical traditions, which order, integrate, and evaluate the different aspects of Christ's work in different ways. These traditions, however, are enmeshed in a third multicontextuality, namely the space of broader Old Testament remembrances and expectations. Welker describes the fourth multicontextuality as our respective intellectual and moral interests, worldviews, the spirit of our times. Cf. Welker (2002c:137ff; 2011a:179ff.).

14 Welker (2012a) mentions that the historical Jesus, that radiates into different contexts and effects different perspectives on him, can be characterised by the kingly office, where selfless and self-withdrawing love are particularly emphasised. Cf. Welker (2012a:235-243; 2013b:286ff.).

15 This is important, among others, to prevent Jesus' person bound up with expectations that are too narrow and realizing the *emergent* character of the reign established through the Spirit of Christ. Cf. Welker (1992b:497ff.).

16 The significance of this relation is also alluded to in the *festschriften* given to Welker on his sixtieth birthday. Cf. Schüle and Thomas (2007; 2009).

17 Cf. e.g. Welker (1999a:96-109; 2002d:311ff.).

18 In light of the biblical traditions' multitude of references to what might be described as 'light appearances', which verifies a discontinuity between the pre-and post-Easter Jesus in spite of a continuity, and the 'empty tomb', which verifies that the pre-Easter body of Jesus disappeared or was definitively withdrawn, it is for him absolutely clear

rather, depict the more complex real presence of the Resurrected as what could be designated as an appearance, on the one hand, and as exhibiting features of an encounter, on the other (Welker 1994a:39ff.; 2002e:31ff.). Despite their emphasis on continuity between the pre- and post-Easter Jesus, these confrontations with the post-Easter Jesus evidently substantiates the immense difficulty of re-identifying and recognizing the resurrected Jesus.

For Welker, furthermore, a distinction needs to be made between the biblical notions of ‘flesh’, the physical dimension of a person’s life that, though perishable, nevertheless indispensably lives at the expense of other lives (Welker 2012b:41-45), and ‘body’ that, whilst bound to the flesh, is pervaded by spirit (Welker 2010b:98ff.). While the fleshly dimension of the body might be totally absent in the appearances of the Resurrected, the spiritual dimension of the body is present (Welker 2012b:125). This presence acquires a new concrete form insofar as the Resurrected himself, in the power of the Spirit, creates a post-Easter ‘body of Christ’. In the resurrection the Spirit is thus encountered in ‘bodily’ form (Welker 2007a:458ff.). This differentiated understanding of the ‘body’ in relation to the ‘Spirit’ thenceforth enables him to define the more complex ‘spiritual body’ as a multifaceted¹⁹ bearer of revelation in which the complete fullness of Christ’s person and life is now present (Welker 2012a: 132).

7. The relation between the Spirit and the crucified Christ is also of significance in Welker’s thought. The Spirit is the *Spirit of the crucified Christ*. Here a recognition of that which leads to the crucifixion allows him to better understand the Spirit of the Crucified.

The cross, on the one hand, exposes how an *entire* representative world cooperatively conspires against God²⁰ and how the world might close itself off from God (Welker 2012a:172-178). The crucifixion of Christ, on the other hand, in the light of the resurrection, reveals the God who

that the resurrection cannot be equated simply with a physical revivification. Cf. e.g. Welker (1996b:206ff; 2012a:111-118).

19 Cf. e.g. Welker (1995a), where he describes in more detail the differentiated constitution of the body of Christ.

20 Welker often highlights how Jesus Christ is crucified in the name of religion, in the name of the law, in the name of the ruling politics and of the public opinion. Cf. Welker (1999a:113-115).

selflessly gives himself to this world. Welker, conscious of the fact that the concepts of selflessness and self-giving have been misused differentiates between sacrifice that implies victimization and sacrifice that has to do with self-giving. In the light of the crucifixion it becomes clear for him that Jesus Christ, by becoming and being *human*, gives himself to the world as sacrifice despite the fact that he is then victimized by those he gives himself to (Welker 1992a:311).²¹ As the Spirit of the crucified Christ, embodied in the Crucified, this selfless trait is also to be ascribed to the Spirit.²² In addition, this Spirit is in fact given to the world that conspires against God (Welker 1992a:290); constantly, in complete selflessness, testifying to Jesus Christ.

8. In this way *the Spirit embodies* who the exalted *Christ* is ‘for us’ today.²³ The Spirit, in this sense, is to be comprehended as the person of Christ. For Welker, however, if ‘person’ is simply denoting a point of reference, it is a reductionist conception of what have been described as the ‘personhood’ of the Spirit. He therefor prefers to talk about the *public* person of the Spirit,²⁴ by which he means that the Spirit is the pluriform unity of perspectives on Jesus Christ, a unity in which people participate and which people help to constitute. The Spirit thus is the public person that corresponds to Jesus Christ (Welker 1989a:140).

For Welker, though, it is important to acknowledge the difference between the person of Christ and the person of the Spirit, who forms a social sphere in the world.

21 Here Welker follows the thought of Hartmut Gese, Bernd Janowski, and Sigrid Brandt Cf. Welker (1999a:118-124).

22 Cf. e.g. Welker (1992a:203, 207, 208, 262, 273, 287, and 295). This selflessness is often further differentiated in what Welker has defined as self-withdrawal and free self-withdrawal. Cf. e.g. Welker (1992a:384, 285, 294, 295, 305, 307, and 312).

23 This Christ, for Welker, cannot be present without the Spirit and this Spirit’s power. The Spirit thus gives shape to the threefold Gestalt of God’s reign, where the cross is conceived in relation to the prophetic and the resurrection to the priestly. Cf. e.g. Welker (2011a:188).

24 It is only by being formed in relation to a social sphere, in relation to what Niklas Luhmann labelled ‘resonance’, which might be defined as multifarious networks of relationships, that human beings acquire the features of personhood. These domains of resonance, although partially dependent on ‘the person’, are not the results of their own activity. This unity of perspectives constitutes what Welker describes as the ‘public person’. Cf. Welker (1989a:126ff.).

4. The social Spirit: The social sphere of the Spirit in the world

9. The Holy Spirit, which should not be confused with the social concept of spirit developed by Hegel,²⁵ concretely brings forth *new community* (Welker 2007b:107ff.; 2004b:144ff.).

This Spirit is poured out *from heaven*, which is not to be conceived of as an obfuscatory conception for a power that has the abstract potential to overcome and gain access to everything, whether resisted or not (Welker 1992a:139). In the biblical traditions heaven is inter alia referred to as the domain that from a human point of view lies above the earth. Heaven, in this light, is to be conceived of as the domain of reality that is relatively imperceptible, that cannot be manipulated, but in a perceptible way determines life on this earth. Thus, when in the biblical traditions inconceivable powers and forces appear on the earth it is regarded as an activity that proceeds from heaven. With this in mind it is not only natural, but also cultural forces and powers, e.g. justice, and powers and forces of history and of the future that for the biblical traditions are localized in heaven. On the one hand this means that heaven cannot be perceived merely in a naturalistic manner. On the other hand it needs to be recognized that heaven is not to be divinized. Heaven, like the earth, is a creature, and is in fact created by God (Welker 1988a:216; 1995b:56-68; 2006c:313ff; 2013c:16ff.). This, along with the realisation that the perceived heavens are only a part of heaven and that these parts are perceived differently, allows Welker to understand heaven as a field of reference for differentiated universality.²⁶ It is from this heaven, regarded by the biblical traditions to

25 Hegel, trying to make sense of the *reality* of the spirit, wants to remove what he understood to be an essential deficit in Aristotle's metaphysical spirit. He criticized Aristotle's conception of spirit to be too abstract, and for this reason failing to understand the true activity of spirit. Spirit, for him, is to be comprehended as *real* processes of 'producing self' and of 'becoming thematic to self', as the complex 'self-relation of a historical world'. In this sense Hegel can define spirit as 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I', and differentiate between 'spirits' of different complexity. Hegel, however, still understands this spirit to be spirit only 'in itself and at home with itself', which makes it difficult to see why spirit should not be comprehended as an essentially collective and egotistic power. Cf. e.g. Welker (1992a:289-302; 2003b:7ff; 2006b:221-223).

26 This means that heaven is to be regarded as a field of reference that extends beyond space and time. Thus, whatever separates creatures in space and time have in common that they live beneath heaven. Cf. Welker (1981a).

be the rudimentary location of the presence of God, which the Spirit is poured out on the most variegated plurality of which it is impossible to get an overview, *on all flesh*.

In this manner the Spirit forms a new community, which he describes as a force field that constitutes different multi-place public force fields. These force fields are characterised not by an abstract homogenizing unity,²⁷ but by a cultivation and preservation of creative differences. The force fields are thus connected with a heightened sensitivity to differences, constantly differentiating creative differences that are constitutive for community from differences that halter and disintegrate community. The Spirit reveals God's power in these force fields by concurrently elucidating different people and groups of people (Welker 1992a:32, 33). It is through the pouring out of the Spirit on all flesh that God establishes the mentioned multi-perspectival witness to Godself. In these force fields, characterised by a heavenly complexity, one group of people, the group that has 'the say', no longer determines how God is to be conceived. Here it becomes particularly clear that God does not work only through one group of people (Welker 1995c:468ff.).

10. It is in and through this differentiated community that the poured out Spirit brings forth that which could be conceived of as the universal fulfilment of *the intentions of the law*.

The inability to understand the relation between the law and the Spirit, which is an immense obstacle in developing a realistic theology,²⁸ has often distorted the intricate power of the law. The Spirit gains clear contours in the law. He understands these intentions, the weightiest and most important aspects of this law, which is to be found with differing emphases in all biblical law texts, to be the establishment of justice, mercy

27 When discussing the workings of the Spirit Welker often refers to Joel and Acts' description of the outpouring of the Spirit. Where in Joel unexpected equality are particularly highlighted, Acts, in the light of this equality, reflects on a unanimity brought forth by the Spirit in the midst of preserved differences. Cf. Welker (1993a:363ff; 2009a:59ff.).

28 The importance of the relation between the law and the Spirit becomes clear in the fact that Welker originally intended to begin his lengthier publications with a volume on 'God's law and God's Gospel', and that the actual substance that was to be treated in working on this topic directed his attention to God the Spirit. Cf. Welker (1999b:136ff.).

and knowledge of God. These elements of the law are to be expected with a degree of certainty (Welker 1985a:680ff; 1986a:237ff.; 1997b:390ff.). The *legal* code of the law, taking as its point of departure a community of equal persons, is concerned with the regulating of conflict and the restoration of equality following conflict (Welker 1993b:779ff.); the *mercy* code of the law, assuming the coexistence and participation of equal and unequal persons, seeks constantly anew the routinized protection of the marginalised and the safeguarding of their concerns (Welker 1986b:39ff.; 1996c:143ff.); and the *cultic* code of the law, that as the critical source and framework of this justice and mercy has to do with the cult, the regulated, public and relatively accessible relation to God.²⁹

For Welker it is the Spirit who protects and cultivates the interconnectedness of these particular aspects of the law. It is precisely in this strict interrelation, in fact only when these elements stand in reciprocal interconnections to each other, that the Spirit brings forth the fulfilment of the law *universally*.

11. Welker finds the interconnection between the Spirit that fulfils the law and the *creative and re-creative Spirit* to be of particular importance. For him this differentiated work of the Spirit in creation is discernible only when it is realised that, on the one hand, the Spirit is not abstractly working in that which exists and, on the other hand, creation is neither simply that which exist, which was somehow brought forth and is therefore dependent on whoever created it, nor merely the activity of bringing forth that which exists (Welker 2005a:48).

The biblical traditions describe a process whereby God not only actively brings forth, but also reacts in differentiated ways to that which is brought forth (Welker 1991a:213). These traditions furthermore highlight the essential participation of that which is created in God's creating activity.³⁰

29 Welker has through the years written extensively on the interconnectedness of these aspects of the biblical law. Cf. Welker (1989b:215ff; 1990a: 124ff.; 1994b:9ff.; 1998a: 28ff.; 2013d:205ff.).

30 For the biblical traditions the activity of humans are of particular importance. Welker emphasises that the mandate of dominion brings about a hierarchical relation between human and other creatures who, on the one hand, live in the same sphere but, on the other, because they share this same sphere, is secondary to humans. They are, however, to rule over other creatures as people made in the image of God. This means that humans, despite their self-preserving nature, are to take responsibility for that which

They refer to the differentiated activity of that which has been brought forth *in* that which is being brought forth. The creative activities of the created do not however cease to be *creaturely* activity.

Welker, in this light, describes the biblical notion of creation as the structuring and also sustaining activity whereby different interrelated creatures, themselves creating and taking part in the creating activity, are brought into interdependent relations to each other (Welker 1995d:173ff.). For Welker it is only by being interwoven in each other that it becomes creation. The activity of creation can thus be conceived of as different creating spheres being brought into fruitful and life-furthering relations of interdependence (Welker 1988b:1119ff.; 1995b:24–32; 2001d:22ff.). Welker recognises this creating activity also in the activity of the creating Spirit (Welker 1999a:75).

Here it is important to recognise that the creating activity of the Spirit is not to be removed from the flesh. Through the Spirit that which is fleshly is given a share in the breath of life. The withdrawal of this breath, this life-giving Spirit, from that which is fleshly not only results in the losing of life, but in losing that which is common to that which lives. The creative Spirit thus holds fleshly life together inasmuch as this life is given a share in the life-giving Spirit. For Welker this is also true of the renewal of creation through the *recreating* Spirit. This renewal goes hand in hand with a renewal of *fleshliness*, i.e. of dependence and frailty. Through this renewal the Spirit brings fleshly life, which is dead to each other, into interdependent life-furthering fleshly relations that extends beyond nature.³¹ These relations flourish as the Spirit brings about peaceful natural *and* social relations that are mutually beneficial to the revitalization of each other.

12. It is of particular importance to realise that the *individuality* of those constituting the latter relations are not overlooked. The Spirit makes use of particular forms of understanding so that individuals can come to a more differentiated perception of the Spirit. Through these forms

is created. This responsibility is for him to be regulated by the law, i.e. mercy. Cf. e.g. Welker (1997c:436ff; 2001c:80ff.).

31 Although the Spirit brings about the renewal of *fleshly* life it does not bring this life back to 'nature', which preserves itself at the expense of other life. Cf. e.g. Welker (1995b:42–55).

of understanding that are themselves force fields; individuals become members and bearers of the force field of the Spirit.

Faith, that is to be distinguished from a subjectivist faith,³² is such a force field of the Spirit. On the one hand the Spirit gives faith that enables individuals to mediate to each other knowledge of God (Welker 1992a:225). This faith gains clearer contours in a differentiated knowledge of *the triune God* (Welker 1980:66ff.; 2006d:330ff). On the other hand, it is through faith that individuals receive the Spirit, thus becoming bearers of this force field known as faith. Here faith unfolds in seeking truth together.³³

Through this conception of faith Welker is able to develop a more differentiated concept of the individual. In faith individuals are not only recognized in their depth, i.e. their corporeal, spiritual, and culturally and socially conditioned distinctiveness.³⁴ They are secured, dignified and strengthened by the God whose presence they bear (Welker 2001g:258ff.). This is also clear from the perspective of the force field of hope.

In this light it is possible to make sense of the *particular* work of the Spirit (Welker 2005c:34ff; 2010c:90ff.). It becomes clear that Welker's entire theology of the Spirit can be viewed through the lens of what in the Apostolicum is known as the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting (Welker 1992a:303-341).

32 Welker differentiates Wolfgang Hüber's concept of self-secularisation into what he calls 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. This individualising form of faith, which in its withdrawing from communication is of an escapist character, systematically empties faith of its contents. Cf. Welker (1999c:60ff; 2001e:15ff; 2004c:239ff.; 2012a:39-47).

33 For Welker's conception of truth-seeking communities cf. Welker (1989c:101ff; 2001f:107ff; 2005b:91ff.) and also Polkinghorne and Welker (2001).

34 In faith, other than in e.g. the concept of the autonomous person with its reductive emphasis *inter alia* on rationality and failure to fully recognize individuals' embodiedness, individuals are taken seriously in their totality. Cf. e.g. Welker (1999d:169ff; 2000c:95ff.; 2010b:98ff.)

5. The self in the sphere of the Spirit: Social sensitivity and self- and social criticism

13. In order to comprehend the particular work of the Spirit it is imperative that the biblical concept of sin is differentiated. Welker often describes the inability to conceptualize sin as the crises of the *Zeitgeist* (Welker 1999b:136ff.). For him, sin has lost its function (Brandt, Suchocki, Welker 1997:7), by which he means, inter alia, the identification of different stratagems of concealment and placation that makes it possible to reveal that which covers-up self-endangerment and destruction. A differentiated conception of sin is thus needed in order for human beings to recognise the condition they find themselves in.

This condition Welker finds to be revealed remarkably in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ (Welker 1996f:84). The cross reveals the power that the biblical traditions call sin, i.e. the power that destroys the foundations for renewal and regeneration and resonantly reinforces different relations that are detrimental to life (Welker 1989a:134).³⁵ It thus not only reveals the conspiring world closing itself off from God, but again and again confronts human beings with the realization that religion, the ruling politics, the law, and the public opinion, all the bodies that are supposed to serve piety, public order, justice,³⁶ and the promotion of that which is constitutive of community,³⁷ can be detrimental to life by being corrupt, failing and collapsing – also today (Welker 1999a:110-117; 2011d:60ff.). In this manner the cross reveals human beings being threatened not only by powers from

35 In light of Welker's notion of creation it becomes clear that sin isolates humans from interdependent life-furthering relations without them necessarily recognising it. This is also clear in Welker notion of evil, which he often relates to sin. In the power of evil humans are not only isolated from these interdependences, they self-destructively resonates further dissociation of relations. Cf. also Welker (1992a:185-191; 1995b:107-117).

36 Welker often warns that in the power of sin the law is not only corruptible, but a corruptible power. The power of the law, misused by sin, e.g. generates the illusion of justice, mercy and a relation to God, in this manner corrupting an entire epoch by self-protection and self-righteousness on the one hand and self-pacification on the other. Cf. Welker (1989b:222-225; 1992a:237-238).

37 Welker makes it particularly clear that, in comparison with the interrelation of justice, mercy and knowledge of God, morality is not able to shape life relations sufficiently. This is, inter alia, because of the corruptibility of morality in the power of sin. Cf. Welker (1995e:39ff; 1997d:190ff.).

the outside, but from the inside (Welker 1999a: 53-63, 2005d:107ff.) – i.e. the self-jeopardising of entire societies (Welker 1987:309ff.). The cross thus reveals *the powerlessness of human beings* in the power of sin, a condition they themselves cannot reverse, but do not recognize as such (Welker 2012a:173).

14. The cross, however, from the perspective of the resurrection, also reveals the power which alone has helped and which alone can help (Welker 1999a:117). In light of Welker's notion of sin it becomes clear that the differentiated work of the Spirit described thus far is to be seen as the renewing work of the Spirit *brought forth on the basis of the forgiveness of sin*. This is also clear in his thoughts on *baptism*, which he describes as a change of lordship, i.e. a symbolic act by which human beings are rescued from the power of sin (Welker 1997e:280ff.; 2005d:107ff.; 2006e:145ff.).

15. The Spirit, by renewing human beings, *takes them into the communion of the resurrected and crucified Christ*. The Spirit in this manner exalts, elevates and ennobles them not only to be part of this communion and to become sisters and brothers of Christ, but also to be bearers of Christ's presence.³⁸ This communion, i.e. the body of Christ, is especially illumined in his thoughts on *Holy Communion*, where the real presence and remembrance of Christ is to be conceived in a community characterised by its concreteness, on the one hand, and by the fact that this community is not bound to a particular space and time, on the other. Holy Communion, for him, is *an* impressive mirror that allows for a more differentiated appreciation of the working of the Spirit (Welker 2003c:154ff.).

The real presence of Jesus Christ could be comprehended in the realisation that human beings are not only reconciled with God, but with each other. This Welker explains by seeing the body and the blood as that which designates human beings' externally perceivable, earthy vitality, and their concrete internal vital power (Welker 1999a:98). By identifying his body and blood with the bread and the wine Jesus Christ thus gives human beings that in which he lives on earth. The relation between the body and blood given in the crucifixion and the bread and the wine that is given and taken

38 The work of the Spirit is not confined to the visible churches, but rather clearly recognizable in secular and religious contexts (Welker 1992a:308).

in holy communion becomes clear when realised that these elements are gifts of creation (Welker 2001h:13ff.), i.e. bread and wine is not conceivable without interdependent natural and social relations brought forth by the Spirit. In holy communion Christ gives these gifts of creation, but also *is* this gift (Welker 1996d:209ff.). In this manner the resurrected and exalted Christ is really present inasmuch as human beings, focused on the selfless Christ,³⁹ celebrates reconciliation with God and celebrates reconciliation with each other (Welker 1996e:47ff.).

In this light it becomes clear that in holy communion, in the *Eucharist*, human beings gather not only to thank God but, by partaking and letting others partake in the differentiated actions of communion, symbolically celebrates the mutual acceptance of one another, i.e. celebrates the intentions of the law (Welker 2004d:5ff.; 2005e:1ff.). Here it is important for Welker to realise that Holy Communion is not to be related *only* to any particular concretely gathered community. This community, rather, stands in the communion of the countless many, i.e. the visible and invisible church of all times and spaces. For Welker this is clearly recognisable in the biblical references to the blood of Christ ‘poured out for you’ and ‘poured out for many’. In the celebration participants are placed into this communion, without dispensing the concreteness thereof (Welker 2001i:197ff.). For Welker this recognition is important in order to be able to guard against ideologies that can develop in communities that are separated from the community of all spaces and times. It is only in the recognition of these dimensions that the fullness and the richness of Christ’s remembrance through the Spirit⁴⁰ are to be perceived as his real presence, in which human beings can partake.

The Spirit, however, not only exalts human beings by bringing them into this community and enabling them to be bearers of this presence of the resurrected and crucified Christ. The Spirit also enables them to partake in God’s *power*.

39 It is of the utmost importance to recognize that the real presence of Christ cannot be separated from his self-giving death on the cross. Holy Communion is instituted in the *night of betrayal* (Welker 1999a:110-124).

40 Through the already mentioned living cultural memory brought forth by the Spirit through the biblical traditions and *holy communion*, the risen and crucified Christ continually come to an effected presence anew. Cf. e.g. Welker (1999e:37ff; 2002f:164ff.).

16. Welker considers his foremost contribution to a theology of the Spirit to be his providing of a new perception of God and of God's *power* (Welker 1992a:11). In the Spirit human beings are full of God's power (Welker 1989a:141). How, in the light of what have been said can this power be conceived of? To be able to understand this power it is of the utmost importance to distinguish *the power of human beings* from *the power of God*.⁴¹

For Welker, the power of God's Spirit, even though it is not yet clearly discernible in the early testimonies of the biblical traditions, is a power that publicly transforms political power structures and power holders. The Spirit's power is described in the relation between the *empowerment* and the *disempowerment* of those on whom the Spirit comes (Welker 1992a:71). On the one hand, the persons upon whom the Spirit comes attain public attention, acquire power over others, and do astounding deeds, i.e. it is clear that God wills to work through them. On the other, these persons find themselves powerlessly being handed over, i.e. their lives are no longer their own. The concrete change of these persons through the Spirit and the public reaction to that change coincide, often leading to the transformation of these publics. Here it is not only made particularly clear that where the power of the Spirit is discernible a public or a multiplicity of publics are immediately or mediatory involved, but also that this power cannot be brought forth and *misused* by human beings.

This power is further differentiated in the fact that the bearer of the Spirit, who brings forth the fulfilment of the law, is characterised by a public *powerlessness*. This bearer of the Spirit universally fulfils the law neither by the overpowering of others nor as the victim of others' overpowering, i.e. the usual forms for pushing through political rule (Welker 1995e:39ff.). This fulfilment is brought forth, through the Spirit, by the one who is publicly silent, who counts for nothing, which have been publicly scorned. By identifying themselves with the one who is publicly powerless, in the domain of the Spirit-bearer, they are enabled to relativize their own conceptions of the law in favour of richer concepts of the intentions of the law.

41 That Welker is immensely interested in comprehending the relation and distinction between these powers is evident from his earliest (1992a) to his later work (2012a). Cf. also Welker (2011b:235ff; 2013e:356ff.).

The Spirit's power, however, is made particularly clear in Welker's conception of the reign of God, where people are gathered without public means of power (Welker 1992a:203-211). In this reign the law's intentions are radicalized into what he labels free self-withdrawal, or rather, *free self-withdrawal for the benefit of others* (Wolter and Welker 1999:103ff.). This reign, however, is not only characterised by a free self-withdrawal for the benefit of others, but by the free and creative self-withdrawal of others for the self. In this free self-withdrawal the power of the Spirit takes on definite contours (Welker 1992a:287, 307; 1992b:497ff.). Through the Spirit, human beings participate in this power of free self-withdrawal for the benefit of others. In *this* power, human beings are not only given part in eternal life, they reflect God's glory (Welker 1992a:312).

In this light it is clear that human beings, taken into the community of Christ and given part in the power of the Spirit are characterized by a *social sensitivity, and self- and social criticism*, which makes it possible to distinguish the Spirit of God and this Spirit's power from other spirits and powers. The differentiation of the relation between these spirits Welker himself describes as the theme that intrinsically underlies his entire theological endeavour (Welker 2013e:356ff.).

6. Impulses from Welker's theology of the Spirit.

In this essay an attempt was made to offer a framework for Michael Welker's theology of the Spirit by inquiring as to the impulses resonating from his *God the Spirit*. In the first part of the essay Welker's theological hermeneutic with regards to the Spirit was explored. It was argued that the relation between the Spirit and the biblical traditions functions as the seedbed of his theology. The particular relation between the Spirit and Jesus Christ was clarified in the second part of the essay where it was argued that this relation is characterised by a selflessness. The work of the Spirit in the world was elucidated in the third part of the essay. Here it was argued that Welker's theology of the Spirit can be characterised as being social. In the final part of the essay the work of the Spirit was examined in light of the Apostolicum. It was argued that the work of the Spirit gains contours in what might be called a social sensitivity and self- and social-criticism.

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