



The Word and the Spirit – Michael Welker’s theological hermeneutics Part 1

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Abstract

In this essay it will be argued that the biblical traditions, or the relation between the Spirit and the biblical traditions, can be understood as the basis, the seedbed, that on which Welker builds his realistic theology in general, and his theology of the Spirit in particular. Welker himself writes in his main work on the Spirit, *Gottes Geist. Theologie des Heiligen Geistes*, translated as *God the Spirit*, that the key trait of his theology is its biblical character. He even regards this work to be the first comprehensive biblical theology of the Spirit. This polemical motive in his theology, where a creative and truly complex conception of the Spirit is related explicitly to the biblical traditions, indeed, to the Word of God, will be clarified in the course of this essay. In the first part of this essay, it is shown that for Welker, the Word of God is not to be confused with the human word. In the light of the depth of the Spirit, this word is revealed to be deficient. Against the background of this differentiation the essay focuses on the biblical traditions, i.e. the Word of God. In order to understand Welker’s complex understanding of the Word of God, what he refers to as the fourfold weight of the biblical traditions is differentiated in the light of a general understanding of what could be conceived as a “biblical theology”.

Key words

Michael Welker; Spirit of God; Biblical traditions; Word of God; pluralism

Der Heilige Geist ist ein ganz besonderer Geist ... über ihn können wir ohne eine Orientierung an den biblischen Überlieferung keinen Aufschluss gewinnen (2003a:7).

Wir müssen deutlich machen, warum dieses Wort in bestimmten Zeiten unsere Kultur erfrischt und belebt, und wir müssen wieder glaubwürdig verständlich machen, daß ein gutes Ethos, eine Kultur mit Niveau ganz wesentlich davon abhängt, daß das Wort Gottes lebendig ist und daß es, mit den Reformatoren gesagt, getrieben, d.h. gesprochen, gehört, erforscht, diskutiert und in all dem verkündigt und vernommen, gelesen, bedacht, ergründet, diskutiert und in all dem gesucht wird (1997a:7).

1. The Spirit and the Word of human beings

1. Michael Welker wants to understand the Spirit of the biblical traditions. He wishes to differentiate this Spirit from other influential spirits and interpretations of spirit and therefor develop a differentiated biblical conception of the Spirit (Welker 1992a:11).

That the biblical traditions can be seen as the seedbed of Welker's theology in general, and his theology of the Spirit in particular, is clear in the essay "Geist und Wort, Wort und Geist" (Welker 1996a), translated as *Word and Spirit, Spirit and Word. A Protestant Response* (Welker 1996b). What is particularly interesting is that Welker writes this essay on the relation between the Word and the Spirit, published in *Pentecostal Movements as an Ecumenical Challenge*, as a response to the question of tongues and prophecy and the Pentecostal Systematic theologian at Vanguard University Frank D. Macchia's interpretation thereof.

In his essay "A Pentecostal Perspective" Macchia relates the Spirit especially to that of "awe", "wonder", that which is "too deep for words", and refers to the "inadequacy of language" to describe the "awesome mystery of God" (Macchia 1996:63-69). This is also the case in his essay "Discerning the Spirit in Life: a Review of God the Spirit by Michael Welker", where he gives a remarkably in-depth review of Welker's work on the Spirit. Here he criticizes Welker inter alia for his lack of recognition of "the incomprehensible depth from which the Spirit's work emerges and toward which it is directed" and of references to "experiences that move us in ways too deep for rational thought and articulate speech" (Macchia 1997:13).

Where Macchia relates the Spirit and its working especially to that which could *not* be described, Welker finds the working of the Spirit to be extraordinary precisely in the Spirit's giving of "words", "language", "insight" and "knowledge" that enables human beings to speak to and about God (Welker 1997a:29-34). In light of the difference in these frames of thought it already becomes clear why the relation between the Spirit and the Word is so important to Welker.

From the title of Welker's essay, "Word and Spirit, Spirit and Word", however, it is clear that he does not understand the relation between the Word and the Spirit in the traditional sense of the word, i.e. he does not conceive of this relation in what he labels a "typically Protestant" priority of the Word over the Spirit (Welker 1996b:76). Instead of an understanding of this interrelation where the Spirit is played off against the Word, i.e. the Word is placed over against the Spirit, Welker – in line with Macchia – underlines the deficiency of the human word in the light of the depth of the Spirit (Welker 1996a:161). The Spirit, he emphasises, must in fact help the human word "which is sometimes helpless, sometimes selfish and high-handed" (Welker 1996b:78).

When relating the Spirit to the Word, i.e., to "words", "language", "insight" and "knowledge", it is therefore important to recognize that Welker does not have this human word in mind. He differentiates between the human word and the Word of God that, in relation to the Spirit, functions as the seedbed of his theology (Welker 1996a:161).

2. He consciously, however, does not characterise his theology as a "biblical theology". This is clear not only in the introduction to *Gottes Geist*, but in the important essays "Biblische Theologie. Fundamentaltheologisch" (Welker 1994b) translated as "Biblical Theology. II. Fundamental Theology" (Welker 1994a) and "The Tasks of Biblical Theology and the Authority of Scripture" published in a *Festschrift* for Thomas Gillespie, *Theology in the Service of the Church* (Welker 2000a).

In these essays Welker gives a thorough description of the concept of "biblical theology", making it clear that "biblical theology" seems either "to propagate a notion of system and unity that is theologically and intellectually problematic" or "lends inappropriate emphasis to the obvious point that the biblical texts speak of God in a qualified way and that Scripture, one way

or another, is a source of Christian theology” (Welker 2000a:233). Here it is important to recognise that even though he finds the efforts of “biblical theology” to be related to each other in different ways and also finds these efforts to bring with it intra- and interdisciplinary tensions that can be very constructive (Welker 1986:5),¹ the countless meanings of the concept, which requires constant clarification, urges him to describe his theology as a “realistic theology” (Welker 1994b).²

This “realistic theology” is able to more adequately encapsulate the key concerns of his theological hermeneutic. To be able to make sense of this hermeneutic of “realistic theology”, i.e. the realistic trait of his theology, it is important to understand Welker’s conception of the Word. In this light the question about the relation between the Spirit and the Word will be asked again, where the different weightings of Macchia and Welker, which might be representative of the Pentecostal and Reformed frames of thought, will be made clear.

2. The Spirit and the Word of God

1. For Welker the Word of God is of the utmost importance. In “Christliche Theologie – wohin an der Wende zum dritten Jahrtausend?” (Welker 1996c), translated as “Christian Theology: What Direction at the End of the Second Millennium?” and published in a *festschrift* for Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Theology* (Welker 1996d), and in “Serving God in a Time When a Worldview Collapses: The Pastor-Theologian at the Beginning of the Third Millennium”, in a *festschrift* for Wallace Alston, *Loving God With One’s Minds: The Pastor as Theologian*, he describes the primary task of the Christian theologian as taking up the challenge of God’s Word (Welker 2004a:88).³

1 Cf. in this regard the ‘Project of Bible and Theology’, a four-year project, in part lead by Michael Welker and William Schweiker, which facilitated conversation between biblical study and theological study (Welker, Schweiker 1997; Miller 1997). In line with these conversations Welker (with Friedrich Schweitzer) also facilitated “Reconsidering the Boundaries between Theological Disciplines”, a conference reflecting on the shifting of boundaries between theological disciplines of Systematic and Exegetical Theology and between Practical Theology and Theological Ethics (Miller 2005; Juel 2005).

2 Cf. Oberdorfer (1997), which is often mentioned by Welker when referring to his own theological hermeneutic.

3 Cf. also Welker (1991a).

He sees this Word to be revealed in the biblical traditions. In the essay “Sola Scriptura? The Authority of Scripture in Pluralistic Environments”, written for the *Festschrift* of Patrick D. Miller, *A God So Near*, it becomes clear that for Welker the biblical traditions are the fundamental testimony to the Spirit of God (Welker 2002a:378). He underlines the idea that the biblical traditions are to be understood as the “queen” among the manifold testimonies that frequently are ascribed to God (Welker 2003a:4). This means that even though he finds these traditions to be the main testimony to God (Welker 1994c:47), these testimonies are not to be equated with God (Welker 2000b:134; Welker 2000c:157,164). The biblical traditions are the Word of God in the words of human beings, i.e. human perspectives. He therefor describes the biblical traditions as a *multi-perspectival* testimony to the Spirit of God.

To make sense of this multi-perspectival testimony it is important to examine what he often refers to as the “fourfold weight” of the biblical traditions. In the essay “Das Vierfache Gewicht der Schrift. Die mißverständliche Rede vom “Schriftprinzip” und die Programmformel ‘Biblische Theologie’“, published in a *Festschrift* for Gunda Schneider-Flume, *Daß Gott eine große Barmherzigkeit habe. Konkrete Theologie in der Verschränkung von Glaube und Leben*, he differentiates this fourfold weight into the historical, cultural, canonical and theological weight, which will subsequently be described.

2. Welker, firstly, finds it important to recognise the *historical weight*. The reason for the importance of this recognition already at the outset might be ascribed to the indisputability of this weight (Welker 2001a:12-13). The biblical traditions contain the most diverse multiperspectival testimonies collected over a period of more than a millennium (Welker 2000c:164). Welker, following the former German New Testament scholar at the University of Erfurt, Heinz Schürmann, therefor refers to the biblical traditions as a “pluralistic library” (Welker 1997b:68-69).

Welker’s crucial insight is that over a course of time these testimonies *developed*, i.e. were “prepared, gathered, compared with one another, related to one another, attuned to one another, and checked against one another” (Welker 2002a:378). They record experience and knowledge of God from the most divergent settings in life (Hamm and Welker 2008:73).

Instead, however, of focusing on *this* remarkable history of testimonies he finds the inconsistency, i.e. the “broad, ugly ditch” between the settings in life of the biblical traditions and today’s settings in life to have repeatedly been *overemphasised* (Welker 2000c:165). Welker therefor highlights that despite these divergent settings in life the constant in both the biblical traditions and the “today” consists in the fact that it is *human beings* with their questions before God. These human beings are “deeply unsettled, afflicted, and despairing; they have experiences of good fortune, liberation and hope; they have bodily needs similar to ours; they live with love and hate, hope and disappointment, sickness and death; they are exposed to the powers of nature and culture; they seek to direct and improve both their individual lives and shared human life, and in so doing repeatedly run up against their limits” (Welker 2002a:379).

Welker’s emphasis on this continuity despite the discontinuity makes it clear why he finds the historical weight of the biblical traditions to have had a massive existential effect on human beings and their divergent settings in life (Welker 2002a:379).

3. Through this historical weight the biblical traditions thus, secondly, have developed a more than two millennia “Wirkungsgeschichte”, i.e. history of effects (Welker 2001a:13-14), which Welker labels the *cultural weight* of the biblical traditions.⁴ In the essay “Reformed Theology and the Reformed Profile” he mentions that this cultural weight can be further differentiated into what he calls the “existential weight”, the “symbolical weight” and the “ethical weight” (Welker 2003a:5).

This history of effects Welker finds to be evident in the most divergent settings in life (Welker 2003a:5). He recognises that this history of effects are, however, not to be romanticised (Hamm and Welker 2008:74). In diverse ways the biblical traditions have functioned and have definitely been functionalised in ways that are detrimental to human beings and their settings in life (Welker 2000b:134). He emphasises, though, that just as the negative traits inherent in the biblical traditions and its history of effects must not be played off against the positive aspects, the negative must not be placed over against the positive (Hamm and Welker 2008:74).

4 Cf. Janowski (2007).

In order to appreciate the historical and the cultural weight of the biblical traditions it is indicative that the differentiated settings in life and these traditions' influence on the most diverse settings in life are apprehended (Welker 2001a:16), i.e. “experiences of peace *and* of war, of liberation *and* of oppression, of joy *and* of distress, accompany and mark the testimonies to God's presence *and* God's distance, to God's saving *and* God's judging actions” (Welker 2002a:379). The main insight here is that the biblical traditions have through more than two millennia critically interacted, and still interacts, with the most divergent settings in life (Welker 2001a:14).

This is particularly clear in the essay “Calvin's Doctrine of the “Civil Government”: Its Orienting Power in Pluralism and Globalization” published in *Calvin Today: Reformed Theology and the Future of the Church*, where Welker examines the impressive ways in which the work of John Calvin, the Swiss Reformer, with his insistence on the biblical traditions, influenced the whole of society. In the light of Calvin's last chapter in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “Of Civil Government”, he illustrates how Calvin moved beyond the mistake of “a fixation on one country only, on one form of government only and on one explosive situation only”, of “perceiving the power of the authorities *remote Deo*”, of “confusing the kingdom of Christ and the civil government” (Welker 2011a:211-213). Welker here emphasizes that it was inter alia Calvin's dedication to the “orienting power” of the biblical traditions' different settings in life, i.e. “in pluralism and globalisation”, which enabled him to move beyond these mistakes. This biblical perspective of Calvin, who through “the separation of powers and a differentiated, non-hierarchically integrated interplay of religion, politics, law, scholarship and education paved the way towards modern, liberal societies”, points to the powerful influence of this cultural weight *today* (Welker 2011b:155-157).

In the essays “Elend und Auftrag der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Theologie am Beginn des dritten Jahrtausends” (Welker 1998a) translated as “Travail and Mission: Theology Reformed According to God's Word at the Beginning of the Third Millennium” and published in *Toward the Future of Reformed Theology. Tasks, Topics, Traditions* (Welker 1999a) and “God's Power and Powerlessness: Biblical Theology and the Search for a World Ethos in a Time of Shortlived Moral Markets” in *Power, Powerlessness, and the Divine* Welker emphasises that there is no reason to think that *this*

history of effects has reached its end (Welker 1995a:50). This is also clear in Welker's conception of the third weight of the biblical traditions, i.e. the *canonical weight* (Welker 2001a:15).

4. It is important to recognize that, for Welker, the biblical traditions are not a mere diffuse plurality of divergent testimonies (Welker 2000b:135). The canonical weight lies for him precisely in these traditions' "internal relationships, inner consistency and inner rationalities" (Welker 2003a:5).⁵ What he describes as the "dialogue" inherent in the biblical traditions aims at coherence i.e. "as new situations arise, these testimonies refer to each other, learn from each other, criticize each other, and strengthen each other" (Welker 2002a:380). This, however, does not mean that this plurality of traditions can be reduced to a mere "principal".

This is especially clear where Welker asks as to the composition, i.e. establishing of the canon. Here he draws from the work of the Egyptologist from the University of Heidelberg, Jan Assmann, for whom canonization is the "preservation, in fixed collections of texts, of memories of broad and enduring scope and comprehensive, normative standards" (Welker 2002a:380).⁶ Assmann finds that the particular need for canonization arises when human beings are confronted with major disintegration and collapse (Welker 2001a:16-17). The main insight here is that "a certain multiplicity of interpretations, a limited multiplicity of exemplary possibilities be developed for explaining and bridging the catastrophe of discontinuity" (Welker 2002a:381). He refers to a "Verweisungszusammenhang", i.e. an interrelated plurality of interpretations. It is when these interpretations, or rather, this plurality of interpretations are brought into reciprocal interconnection that the weightiness of the canon comes into being (Welker 2000d:25).

The potential of this canonical weight gains clearer contours in what Welker refers to as "canonic memory", which plays a major role in his thought. In the essays, "Kommunikatives, kollektives, kulturelles und kanonisches Gedächtnis", published in the *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie: Die Macht der Erinnerung*, a collection of essays particularly focusing on the power of

5 Cf. Eckstein (2007).

6 Cf. Assmann (1999).

memory (Welker 2008a), and “Kanonisches Gedächtnis” (Welker 1999c), he gives a careful description of this loaded concept.

Welker again follows the work of Assmann who accentuates that memory is more than a mere “internal phenomenon, localised in the brain of the individual – a theme for neurophysiology, neurology, and psychology” (Assmann 1992:19-20). He underlines that memory is to be understood as a formative power, i.e. a power for the communal formation of a world. It not only defines the collective past, but the common present and that which is conceived as the future. For him the power of memory becomes clear where Assmann differentiates “communicative memory” from “cultural memory” (Welker 2008a:327-329).

A community’s “communicative memory” is a fluid and changing memory (Welker 1999c:39), it is, on the one hand, continually being deepened and, on the other, continually fading (Welker 1999d:322). Where “communicative memory” develops out of the concrete circumstances of societies, “cultural memory” influences these societies by imposing “sinnhafte Formen”, i.e. meaningful or content laden forms on their collective past, their common present and on their future (Welker 2002b:168). This “cultural memory” is characterised by the fact that it generally is long-lived memory, i.e. it is only with great difficulty that these forms can be changed. The “cultural memory” of a society can thus work to stabilise it against change, inter alia through “communicative memory” (Welker 1999c:39). Assmann, following the French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss,⁷ calls this “cold options of cultural memory”, which is to be distinguished from “hot options”.

For Welker it is important that these “cold” and “hot” options of memory are not placed over against each other (Welker 2008a:328). The tension between these options of memory rather brings forth a “living cultural memory” or what he often calls “canonical memory” (Welker 1999c:39). He accentuates that the biblical canon is a medium that allows for this tension between these options of memory, i.e. the canon, in fact, brings these “cold” and “hot” options of memory into relations that furthers “living cultural memory” or “canonical memory” (Welker 1999c:39).

7 Cf. Strauss (1966).

This “canonical memory” is a significant power (Welker 2008a:330-331). On the one hand, a specific set of texts bind the “cultural memory” and limit the potential for change, i.e. it functions as “cold memory” (Welker 2000d:25-26). On the other, the interpretations of these sets of texts stimulate a “living” memory that potentiates change without giving up the interrelatedness of their plurality, i.e. functioning as “hot memory” (Welker 2008a:330-331). Here it is important to see that human beings cannot induce this “canonical memory”, i.e. “a canon or a canonic memory cannot be planned, launched, or constructed” (Welker 2000e:286).

5. For him, rather, this “canonical memory” is a reality through the Spirit, i.e. “the Holy Spirit is the power which continually renews the act of bringing human beings together for the solidification, renewal, revitalization, and enrichment of (this) memory” (Welker 2000f:132). He finds the content of this memory that gains clarity through the Spirit *to be Jesus Christ*, in whom the weight of the biblical traditions are comprised, i.e. “it is the biblical testimonies” reference to the living God and to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, which gives those testimonies their coherence, their weight, and their orienting power” (Welker 2002a:382).

The “fourfold weight” of the biblical traditions is thus grounded in and also grows out of the fourth weight, i.e. *the theological weight* (Welker 2001a:17-19). The historical, cultural, and canonical weight is for him “ein Spiegel und Abglanz” of the theological weight (Welker 2000b:135), i.e. a reflection of the actual reality of the triune God. The weight of these traditions is thus to be attributed to the importance, the influence, or the weight of the triune God to which these traditions testify (Welker 2000c:165-166).

In light of the theological weight it is clear why Welker conceives of the biblical traditions as a “lebendigen Quelle” (Welker 2002a:382), a living source out of which human beings subsequently live, i.e. “Wir leben aus der schöpferische Kraft Gottes allein, aus Gottes Offenbarung allein (Welker 2000b:141).

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