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INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL WELKER

Michael Welker recently visited the University of the Free State. As Senior Professor and Director of the Research Centre for International and Interdisciplinary Theology at the University of Heidelberg, Welker recently led a project and edited a book (with Michael Beintker and Albert de Lange) on the European Reformation, focusing on forty-eight cities and their Reformers. In light of this project and the five hundred year commemoration of the Reformations, a public lecture was held on the theme *The European Reformation: A liberating educational revolution*.



Acta Theologica was privileged to ask Welker as to his thoughts on doing theology as a Reformed theologian today.

Henco: In light of a more recent dialogue between the disciplines of Law and Theology, you asked: *What makes Theology theology?* (2015) At a most basic level, you argued that at least two elements are necessary for an utterance to be regarded as *theological*. A theological utterance is to show a level of conviction and must be formulated in words, be comprehensible. I am interested in the first of the two elements. Would you say more about that?

Michael: In this article, I argued: A theological utterance about God must show at least a minimum level of conviction to relate to an encompassing sustaining, saving and ennobling power. It must show at least a minimal degree of having been existentially grounded. If this is not the case for the speaker, it should at least hold true for the persons or contexts

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the talk refers to – directly or indirectly. I argue against the danger of a soteriologically empty God, a mere God thought, for example.

Henco: In light of the question above, how would you describe what you have found to be your theological task through the years? What are the most urgent tasks theologians are confronted with today?

Michael: I see the task of a realistic and self-critically realistic perspective on, and witness to God. Realism means that one neither seeks knowledge, nor raises any claims to truth apart or separate from empirically, historically, and rationally supported experience. On the other hand, critical realism means that any and all monopolistic claims resulting from the operations of empirical enquiry, historical research, and rational thinking are to be perpetually and continually subjected to critical assessment.

It is worth noting that it is precisely the rigorously Trinitarian-theological orientation and a biblical-theologically shaped "discernment of the spirits" that is demanding and promoting such critical realism in theology. The creative God does nothing without the divine Spirit. The divine Spirit, in its own turn, stands in nuanced unity with the divine Word, which, revealed in Jesus Christ, is always also characterized by its entry into our earthly historical world. This conceptual approach enables us to dispense calmly and critically with the one-sidedness and abridgements of naturalistic, mentalistic, and similar purely metaphysical theological and philosophical approaches in theology and faith.

I try to develop my theology in dialogue with biblical studies, on the one hand (the *Jahrbuch für Biblische Theologie* is a prime example).

Henco: You have been part of at least three projects relating to *Reformed* Theology, often in conversation with South Africans (*Toward the future of Reformed Theology: Tasks, topics, traditions*, 1998; *Reformed Theology: Identity and ecumenicity*, 2003; *Reformed Theology: Identity and ecumenicity II: Biblical interpretation in the Reformed tradition*, 2007). What is it in the Reformed tradition that interests you?

Michael: There are several aspects that we also highlighted in these books. A broad biblical orientation, the appreciation of the divine Law (with its care for justice, mercy and the search for true knowledge of God), also a realistic understanding of the presence of the resurrected and elevated Christ and his pouring of the Spirit.

Henco: What makes Reformed Theology *reformed*?

Michael: Some main points in my view: Trust in the power of God's Word and God's Spirit, a biblical and eschatological concentration, ecumenically

verified truth claims, the affirmation of a creative pluralism and a discernment of the spirits, the will to engage modern societies in truth- and justice-seeking communities – within and outside of the churches.

Henco: You have published on the theme of a *Volkskirche* in Germany (an example is *Kirche im Pluralismus*, 1995). For many South Africans, to be in the Reformed tradition and in a *Volkskirche* is part of their *religiöses Selbstverständnis.* What are your thoughts on a *Volkskirche* in South Africa?

Michael: I cannot judge on notions of a *Volkskirche* in South Africa. Many years ago, I wrote an article on "The myth *Volkskirche*", relating to the German church. Why did I speak of a "myth"? The term *Volkskirche* comes with at least five meanings. First, church by and through the people, and the *Volkskirche* as a free association of brotherly and sisterly communities. Second, *Volkskirche* as a church directed towards the people, aiming at the Christianization of the whole people. Third, *Volkskirche* as a national church, the church of the nation. Fourth, *Volkskirche* as an institution of encompassing pastoral care and support. Fifth, *Volkskirche* as a church with a claim to integrate the whole society, balancing communality and difference between church and state.

These different perspectives offer very good strategies of self-presentation. The critique of a hierarchical and paternalistic *Volkskirche* is countered by presenting a freedom-loving community; a complaint about *Volkskirche*'s elitarianism is met by pointing to the *Volkskirche* as the "faithful silent in the country"; a complaint about the forced passivity of the members is confronted with the diaconal power; suspicion of paternalist impositions are questioned by showing that *Volkskirche* can engage with a multitude of real situations of need; the celebration of the church as enacted by the people is calmed down by the interests of hierarchical institutions to promote self-sustenance and continuity.

Henco: You have been part of many interdisciplinary projects (examples are *Concepts of law in Sciences, Legal Studies and Theology*, 2013; *The depth of the human person*, 2014). What, at a most basic level, can Theology contribute to this dialogue? Or is the way I am asking this question precisely what prohibits theologians from fruitful interdisciplinary conversation?

Michael: There is no *a priori* contribution – except the concentration on theological content and the willingness to join truth-seeking communities. Crucial for success were in each case the careful search for a fruitful common topic, competent conversation partners, and the investment of time, mutual trust and patience.

Henco: In South Africa, several concepts have been introduced as a means for finding a grammar for life together (an example is *human rights*). Is there a specific theological concept(s) you have found to be fruitful in this regard? Or, to ask the question differently: How can theology make a fruitful contribution to the South African society?

Michael: I have no generalist perspective on "the" fruitful contribution to a whole society. Theology should help to develop honest reflection and talk about God and God's revelation and should – also by good example – encourage trust in the creative power in truth- and justice-seeking communities.