

**"WHY ARE YOU SO INTERESTED
IN THE WANDERING PEOPLE OF GOD?"**

Michael Welker

on Theology and Common Sense

EDITOR'S NOTE: Of all our contemporaries who have worried and worked the questions of pluralism and public space, nobody does so with greater singularity of purpose and effect than Michael Welker of Heidelberg University. Soundings readers have heard from this exceptionally wide-ranging theologian twice in the last several years.

*In the first essay, published here in 1987 (Fall/Winter), Welker explores what he calls the self-jeopardizing of human societies, their age-old tendency, as if flood and famine and earthquake and plague and the like were not calamitous enough, to do themselves in without help from angry gods or an indifferent nature. Here he looks not only to the work of Niklas Luhmann in social theory, which is not yet widely recognized in this country, but also to the famously haunting final chapters of *Adventures of Ideas*, in which Whitehead ponders the last and most elusive of the notions that define what we must mean by civilization — the "intuition of peace." Among the many forms of jeopardy that this intuition brings into sharper contrast and focus, as Welker exegetes Whitehead, trivialization is the danger that lingers most restlessly and provocatively in the readers mind. What quicker way can a society descend into irretrievable dilapidation, whether of the body or of the soul, than to start down a road where its choices and opportunities are all between novelty and nostalgia, or between eccentricity and conformity? The sorry oscillation of these choices among people who cannot decide whether they should pander to change or to tradition, whether they should be pluralists or — worse fate still — hegemonists, is the sure sign of a society bogged down, in Welker's memorable term, in trivial self-relation. The insight Welker helps us achieve in this essay into what an earlier generation might have termed the "prospect for transcendence" is, quite simply, stunning, and shows why Welker is probably the most*

important European writing on these matters today.

In the second of his Soundings essays (Spring 1995) Welker tackles the question of pluralism more directly. The occasion for these latter remarks was provided by a critique two Americans, David Tracy and Francis Schüssler-Fiorenza, directed toward the social thought of Jürgen Habermas. The Americans were urging Habermas to consider the importance of the powerful symbolics of religion in his rendition of the advanced pluralistic scene, and Welker in turn urges them on to consider the matter even less abstractly, by attending to the rich configuration of resources to be found in the biblical literature that underwrites both Jewish and Christian readings of human multiplicity.

*More recently Welker's major new study, *Gottes Geist*, has been translated into English and published by Fortress Press as *God the Spirit* (1995). Part of what makes this work remarkable and in many ways unique is Welker's imaginative but unscholastic use of key American intuitions about the experience of an open society, especially his free-spirited uses of Whitehead. The Germans have, not surprisingly, been even more at a loss to know what to do with Whitehead than has mainstream American philosophy. Now comes a Heidelbergger who not only makes better use of Whitehead's aesthetic and cultural insights than the Americans, but who does it in the richest of conversations with the classical biblical texts. Who would have thought that this conjunction of interests could have shed so much light upon our troubled search for public space and civic discourse!*

A translation of "Schöpfung und Wirklichkeit", published by Fortress Press, will also appear this year as "God the Creator". This work includes the Warfield Lectures given at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1991-1992.

Welker spent the fall term of 1995 in residence at Princeton Seminary, and we took advantage of this latest visit to the States to do the following interview with him.

SOUNDINGS: Ours is a decentered, unsystematic age where, as Yeats says, "the center will not hold." There are those who argue that the project of building a systematic theology — an entire system of propositions outlining the structure of the faith of any religious community — might be an anachronism. In your own systematic theology you begin with the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Does this beginning reflect your sensitivity to this contemporary anti-systematic mood? In what ways is your own work attempting to take account of the anti-

systematic inclinations of our time?

WELKER: I would not think about my attempt as an anti-systematic project. Hegel used the expression, *System der Bedürfnisse*, a system of needs of the bourgeois society. Here he has in mind a very flexible system that can be configured out of emergent occasions and rearranging needs, and yet show systematic, describable forms. That is what I am trying to do. Dealing with complex historical, textual, and aesthetic documents and phenomena, I am interested in systematic forms under these conditions.

The best way to describe my interest might be to start with a quote from Beckett I like very much: "Are you merely interested in the whole, or also in something specific?" I think under the conditions of a postmodern awareness — the awareness that we have to live with perspectival constructions of the whole — the figures and ciphers for "the whole" are not satisfactory for religious interpretation. At the same time, we cannot leave our striving for orientation and specificity to moral discourse alone, which simply negotiates and renegotiates common tasks and goals.

So, once one takes a skeptical stance in this respect — and I am inclined to do this — one has to see that morals, although they are indispensable for every society, have to do with respect — with giving, and paying, and withdrawing, or threatening withdrawal of, respect. "Respect" means here everything from admiration to control or observation of each other. The whole interplay of moral communication has to do with adjusting these mutual expectations by giving and withdrawing respect, and these morals can be sponsored or coined by a diversity of ethos. I think the still very high value that morals have in our societies is partly due to the insight that no human society can do without morals; we must have these adjustments of giving and withdrawing respect. And at the same time our morals are still very much indebted to the Jewish-Christian ethos, including the goals of justice, equality, compassion for the weak, and so on.

But coming out of a society which has seen morals corrupted, I am very sensitive to the endangerment of the processes of giving and withdrawing respect. You can easily have a society where you give respect to certain forms of veiled brutality. And even now in our societies we have a lot of latent patterns built in which we sanctify by our morals, but which, with the shift of sensitivities, look quite different. So here I have a skeptical approach toward mere morals, and I ask the question, "How do we get an ethos that can support our morals creatively and peacefully, and how can we get an ethos after we no longer have the great

ciphers of the whole?"

So we have difficulties with the figures and ciphers of the whole, and we have to be skeptical about moral discourse in and of itself. My third departure point is the insight that this ethos cannot be generated by extrapolating from person-to-person communication. I think here the conventional European theology of this century has been heavily centered on I-thou constellations and person-to-person ethics. Although these are very important parameters, I have a strong sense that they are below the level of our leading traditions, and below the level of the common sense of our day.

SOUNDINGS: What do you mean when you say "below the level of common sense?"

WELKER: Just that the common sense of our day sees that the patterns of behavior in friendship or in family constellations do not help to address ecological concerns, political concerns, and so on. As soon as religion tries to cast its approach in highly plausible figures, trying to explain complex life situations as if they were interpersonal, dual-focal constellations, common sense thinks, "Oh, alright, you theologians cannot provide an orientation for us." And here I have a feeling that we have what I call Fehloptimierung, an optimization which is misleading, or we might speak of misleading abstractions that have taken a wrong direction, or which had been helpful in a certain time but now work in a deteriorating way. I think that here our conventional theology, up to dialectical theology, has been heavily shaped and coined by misleading abstractions or misleading orienting figures. So these are my points of departure from "classical," European theologies. I ask myself, "How can we overcome these difficulties with the figure of the whole, the I-Thou correlation, and the reliance on moral communication alone?" Here I have been very much impressed by Whitehead and Hegel in my effort to address complex, symbolic resources which are operative in our societies and cultures. We cannot simply look for one construction, or one type of construction, however great. We cannot get past these difficulties by launching one idea. That might help for a couple of weeks or months; you can build up a fashion if you have one abstraction that addresses a couple of current needs and gets you through the mesh of current cultural crises. But if we want to build a sound alternative we have to readdress complex symbolic resources. This is why I became interested in the biblical traditions again. Although I am a philosophical theologian from the outset, given the complexity of the problems we are dealing with, it has seemed to me that in this situation it will not help to ad-

dress simply a theory of the nineteenth or twentieth century, but we have to do a bit more. We have to strive for careful analysis of the potentials lying within the complex symbolic resources which are still operative in our societies, for good and for bad, and to decode them and to reformulate them, to understand their systematica in the way that I tried to describe at the outset. And this brought me back to quite classical topics.

SOUNDINGS: But isn't the biblical tradition founded on the I-Thou relationship that you want to move away from?

WELKER: I don't think so. If we only emphasize the first commandment, then of course one can think this. But then you skip all the other elements, the building up of a security of expectations in the diversity of realms of life, and you get a very reductionistic understanding of God. In the biblical traditions you have not only the encounter model but "from all sides you surround me," so you have the "surrounding" imagery. You have these structures of power that include a plurality: the God of Hosts, God as the ("pouring") Spirit, and so on. I think for the sake of plausibility we have stripped many of these elements away.

In Soundings you have as a leading statement, "Seek simplicity and distrust it." I think we have sought for a lot of simplicity — and this is fine and correct — but now we have to look for more complexity in the key symbols of our cultures. I think we are in a time that is getting so complex that we tend naturally to look for reductions, simplicities, and systematizations, but in our culture — in theology at least — we are more endangered by reductionistic systematics that guide and block our thought, at least in Europe, and I would go so far as to say also in the classic mainline churches. So our strong traditions of dogmatic, confessional centering have operated in a detrimental way in our time, and as I see it we need to go back to the stronger symbolic resources which have been developed over 1500 years, look at these figures, and try carefully to correct them and bring in more complexity, structure, and potentials for orientation.

SOUNDINGS: So is that the nature of the new biblical criticism, the effort to do just that?

WELKER: I would say so. To give a couple of examples; about ten years ago started out with "the law" and the "law and gospel" topic because I thought that that was the clearest, and here

I could work with clear negations. You know these conventional dualities that really had dominated Lutheran theology, and indeed Protestant theology quite as a whole — demand/gift, imperative/indicative — I was sure they were not adequate. The Hebrew Bible and Old Testament scholars kept telling us, "What these systematic theologians talk about has nothing to do with the Old Testament tradition." Then I examined the law traditions in the Old Testament and found highly interesting interactions between legal, cultic, and mercy rode constellations, working on an ethos that tries to care for justice and for the protection of the weak, but at the same time for establishing these elements in common memory and public institutions. So I found very interesting dynamics that had been systematically reduced to mere commandment, and then all the negative sides of mere command which cannot be fulfilled. So I thought, well, I have to work on the caricatures to which we have become accustomed.

The same with the topic of creation. In many, many systematic theology texts you find the creation idea used to foster a classical theism of dominion and control. So dependence is the basic figure of creation. But if you look at the biblical texts you find much more creative elements involved — a very creative process of intertwining, a diversity of creaturely potentials, stellar constellations, biological constellations, cultural constellations woven into each other. Obviously very interesting and important activities are going on, instead of simply bringing forth and controlling everything.

And the last point is the dimension of the Holy Spirit. Many treatments emphasize the vagueness of the Holy Spirit; you cannot grasp it, it is numinous. Well, if you look at these more than three hundred biblical texts on the Holy Spirit, you do have three or four that emphasize this vagueness and this mysticism. But I thought that it would be wiser to see these three or four sentences in the light of the three hundred others instead of the three hundred others in the light of these three. So here you have my kind of approach, looking at abstractions, misleading abstractions, and trying to correct them. Here I feel myself very much in agreement with Whitehead, who described the task of philosophy as a critique of abstractions, and I think we need this in theology too.

SOUNDINGS: Let's talk about influences on your work. We identify perhaps three key influences, but you mention another, which is Hegel, of course. So we know something of the way in which Hegel figures in your thinking. But we want to come more to the present and to ask about your association with Jürgen Moltmann. He has been an advisor and mentor during

important periods of your work. What aspects of his theology do you find will be most enduring, and how does your own thought relate to the work that he has done?

WELKER: I was very impressed by Jürgen Moltmann's "Theology of Hope" when I was a student. I thought that this was an original and innovative piece of theology, really authentic, and not simply talking about theologies of the past, doing theology in an historical way. Moltmann tried to speak to the current culture, but at the same time he picked up very central theological topics, and was — at least with *Theology of Hope* and in some parts of *The Crucified God* — very much engaged in the exchange with the biblical discussion of his day. Maybe this sounds a bit apologetic for my own cause, but when I thought about the potentials for biblical theology and interaction between systematics and biblical theology, it came to my mind that such important books as "Theology of Hope", Schüssler-Fiorenza's „*In Memory of Her*", and James Cone's "Black Theology" have this in common: they engage the biblical traditions very intensively, in a thick way. In "Theology of Hope", of course, Moltmann also picks up the left-Hegelian impulses, the Neo-Marxist mood of the sixties, but above all he is deeply engaged with the exegetical discussions and research projects that were alive in those days — so, I was impressed by this book, and this drew me to Tübingen. I left Heidelberg for Tübingen to study with Moltmann and Käsemann. I was fascinated by the Old Testament scholarship in those days (Westermann, Wolff, and von Rad were at Heidelberg), and I was very involved in philosophy (my later philosophical Doktorvater, Dieter Heinrich, taught in Heidelberg), but I wanted to have a chance to get involved with systematic theology, so I went to Tübingen.

Besides the impression of Moltmann's work there was the personal relation that became very important. Moltmann placed great trust in me. I was 21 when he offered me the opportunity to write a dissertation under him. I was 23 when he split a huge course and gave me half the course to teach. Enormous trust on his side! Our working relationship during the time I was his postdoctoral assistant, and also before this, was basically that he gave me all the manuscripts that he had written to read and to criticize. To my great sadness, he only picked a small selection of my comments. Sometimes he would say to me, "Well, how should I deal with your Heidelberg philosopher's jargon?" Or, "How can I translate your employee's German into English?" But it was a very strong and very supportive relationship. He also never tried to make me into a disciple. He not only tolerated but encouraged my studies in philosophy and my interest in the philosophy of the nineteenth century.

Moltmann also gave me the hint to study Whitehead. Moltmann has a very good intellectual instinct, and although he never really read Whitehead intensively, he had a feeling of something important going on in these texts. One day I talked about my epistemological difficulties with the classical European tradition, and we talked about my Habilitationsschrift, the second step after the doctoral dissertation. He said, "Well, why don't you try Whitehead?" And this was very important encouragement. He did not like this type of thought so much, but he encouraged me to pursue it. I remember I came back from the United States in 1977 and said something like, "Whitehead and these theories that have come out of Harvard are 'a new generation of theory' (eine neue Theoriegeneration)," and he always quoted this with a mixture of appreciation and ironical distance: "Oh, you belong to a new generation of theories!" And I think that this shows the breadth of his mind and the quality of our friendship and academic relationship.

SOUNDINGS: Well, you have led quite nicely into our next question: Whitehead. What about Whitehead? Obviously some of your early work involved the appropriation of his thought in Christian theology. Do you continue to find him important to you, or is there a sense in which you have gone beyond Whitehead (or beyond what we might call "Whitehead scholasticism")? In which areas (for example, law, aesthetics, community theory, fundamental metaphysics, value theory) have you found Whitehead's thought most helpful, and where are you in disagreement with him?

WELKER: The more I study Whitehead — and I continue to work with his theory; last semester my colleague in philosophy, Reiner Wiehl, and I did a seminar on Whitehead with students in philosophy, the sciences, mathematics, and theology — the more I study his theory the more I admire Whitehead as a cultural theorist and a cultural critic. So I am much more interested in his cultural theory than in his metaphysics, although I try to study the latter very carefully. Whitehead's insight is ingenious and anticipates such later discussion as that about the paradigm shift. Whitehead's insight is that our cultures are coined by an interplay of scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and religious codes and parameters — abstractions, as he would say — and that the balance of this interplay shifts from epoch to epoch, he states that this interplay has a strong influence on coining the relative "common sense." And his interest in trying to influence the common sense, whose "dogmatics" are below the level of consciousness, by engaging in this interplay, is a very helpful way to deal with cultural

critique. So we can address religious modes, scientific modes, common-sense modes (which Whitehead basically reads through classic poems — he uses classical poems in order to understand relative common sense), and aesthetical forms, and by engaging in this interplay we can try to shape the common sense and the mentality of a cultural situation. This became a very helpful theoretical endeavor for me, an orienting endeavor. So, in a way, what I am trying to do with the biblical-theology approach is something that Whitehead had suggested from the perspective of philosophy.

I also see in Whitehead a clear awareness of the difference between theology and metaphysics, which I do not see in many of the process theologians. Whitehead is well aware that theologies start with the concentration, as Dieter Ritschl would say, on "implicit axioms" or leading experiences or leading forms of experience that they dogmatize. Like other sciences, theology has specific axiom systems that are attuned to some experiential realms, whereas the metaphysical enterprise is to look for relative commonalities in a diversity of these dogmatized realms of experience. So these are different approaches. They can mutually support each other, but they are not simply the same.

Only if you collapse these differences and say that we are all interested in "the whole," or "the ultimate," or so, then you can fuse theology and metaphysics. But I think that it is helpful that Whitehead keeps this very distinct. So it is not only my theological background, but Whitehead's theory that allows me to divert from many process theologians. But of course my rootedness in theological traditions like Bonhoeffer, Barth, and the Reformation traditions has also given me a clear consciousness of the difference between doing theology out of a theological reference system, and doing theology out of a philosophical or other reference system. In this way I always stayed in this traditional theological enterprise and worked with Whitehead, Hegel, and other grand theories in a way that they support the theological enterprise.

SOUNDINGS: Whitehead says at one point, in a very unsystematic context, that Christianity is a religion in search of a metaphysics...

WELKER: Well, I would say, "Thanks be to God that the search for a metaphysics is not the only interest of the Christian religion!" It is only one among many interests. Of course, it is important. Theological dogmatics strives for a relative universality, and then it hits the questions of metaphysics. Whitehead sees clearly that in this striving for universality, looking

for relative commonalities in a diversity of experiential fields, you pay a price. It forces you to abstract from concrete experiences.

The difference between conventional metaphysics and Whitehead's metaphysics, being a contact theory between a diversity of realms of experience, is very important for me. The old-fashioned metaphysics was "merely interested in the whole" — excuse me if I use a caricature for a moment. The enormous difference between Whitehead's type of metaphysics and conventional forms is that the latter presupposes a rationality and reality continuum that does not acknowledge or appreciate the enormous diversity among cultural spheres and experiential forms. Nietzsche challenged this and Whitehead developed an alternative.

Whitehead is aware that the new metaphysical enterprises have to reconstruct the diversities of basic experiential realms. This I find extremely helpful. So, if you simply have a oneupmanship type of metaphysics, where "Now I speak and tell you how 'the' reality should be perceived," then I think we lose the attention of sensitive publics in our age. As soon as we start with the Whiteheadian enterprise, we are interested in a metaphysics that claims universality exactly by reconstructing the diversity of fields and the diverse claims for universality. We are in a totally different orbit of discourse. I would like to contribute to this kind of discourse and research.

SOUNDINGS: If Whitehead recognizes a clear difference between theology and metaphysics, would you then suggest that in the strictest sense of the term it is impossible to have a "process theology?"

WELKER: We have a diversity of types of process theology, and they reach from very deep interest in decoding Whitehead's theory or Hartshorne's theory, which are quite diverse, to forms of shaping religious language with some semantic impulses. So process theology reminds me in a high degree of the Hegelianism of the nineteenth century, where there is a diversity of appreciations and adaptations of this type of theory. But, of course, we do see some efforts to fuse theology and metaphysics, and although nobody should forbid these, I would say that they are below the level of Whitehead's insight, and I personally would not find them extremely helpful for either theology or philosophy enterprises.

SOUNDINGS: We detect here the presence of another figure — that of Karl Barth. Is this misleading?

WELKER: No, but I wouldn't regard myself as a Barthian. When I wrote a criticism of Whitehead, some process theologians reacted by saying, "Oh, here comes the Barthian." I am more shaped by Bonhoeffer probably than by Barth. But I've found it helpful to distinguish theology that really works out of the framework of biblical symbolics, and a theory of culture that picks up religious impulses. This does not mean that such a theology cannot highly appreciate sociological and philosophical work. I think that Bonhoeffer, when he subtitled his *Sanctorum Communio*, "Eine dogmatische Untersuchung zur Soziologie der Kirche" a dogmatic examination of the sociology of the Church, he had the freedom to bring these very diverse investigations into a unity that at the same time tried to do justice to the theological task. I think this allows us to deal in a very free way also with other positions.

I never expected Whitehead to provide a trinitarian theology or a Christology. I was always aware that he centers mainly on Wisdom traditions, so he has a very selective approach toward the traditions a good theology should address. We should not try to force other positions into all the tasks that we want to shoulder. This allows for more fruitful relations. You can say, "Well, you are doing this, and these and these very important things. And here I want to learn." But you don't have to buy the whole thing. Whitehead is quite selective in his approach to religion. He sees the importance of processes of universalization and individualization, and the co-development of both, and this is one crucial factor for religious thought. But here again he is selective and you can appreciate this and make sense of this without thinking, "How can I press this theory to get answers for all of our theological questions?"

SOUNDINGS: Your mention of sociology brings us to the work of Niklas Luhmann. You dedicated a Soundings article to him at one point and have more recently dedicated certain essays to a discussion of his work. How would you characterize your intellectual relationship to him?

WELKER: In my judgment Niklas Luhmann is the most important scholar in the humanities in post-war Germany. He starts with presuppositions similar to those we have sketched and develops a theory of society which tries to examine the diversity of subsystems in a society and at the same time look for relative commonalities. He is trained basically as a legal scholar. He has written numerous books and articles on the operation of the legal system. He

has published books on the aesthetics of society, the family system, the educational system, religion, economy, and politics. He deals with these diversities of codes and works in a way that Whitehead does on a higher level of abstraction. So when Whitehead looks for the interaction between common sense, religion, aesthetics, and ethical forms and treasures this diversity and the balance of these diverse forms, Luhmann as a sociologist — highly influenced by Talcott Parsons, by the way, who on his side was influenced by Whitehead (they even taught courses together) — tries to elaborate the diverse systemic forms of the functional subsystems in society like the legal, the economic, the political, the educational, and the religious system. However, he is so heavily concerned with the systemic forms that he easily dismisses the other forms that basically shape our societies. I think that he underestimates the dimensions in the "religious system" (to use his language) that are so important for Habermas and others, the civil-society elements, the associations, the free interactions, the emergent types of groups.

I appreciate Niklas Luhmann's theory because he provides a closer view of current societies than a theory like Whitehead's can but, on the other hand, he dismisses many aspects that are important to Whitehead — like the dialogue with the natural sciences — and, given his systemic approach, he also has blind spots regarding religious traditions and communication.

SOUNDINGS: Could you say more about the reception of Luhmann in the United States? Where has his work been most influential?

WELKER: I don't think that Luhmann is so widely read in the United States just yet. This is the problem with all these types of theories, be it Hegel or Whitehead or Heidegger or Luhmann. In order to bridge between these diverse realms of experience, and at the same time do justice to a diversity of these realms, they have to develop strange theoretical languages. As soon as you want to mediate between a diversity of realms and try to care for relative commonalities, and at the same time appreciate the differences, none of these realms offers potentials for this theory. So you have to move into a different realm of language altogether. It is like an "esperanto" approach. These theory languages are not easy to translate or appreciate, and I think this requires time for the culture to adopt. It took thirty to fifty years for German culture to get acquainted with Whitehead, to develop translations and so on. So these large-scale theories, and particularly in a culture where "quick plausibilization" is a big issue, and fast transfer, become more and more difficult of dissemination. So I think in this country there

are few who are already interested in Luhmann's theory, and he also suffers under the prejudices that Talcott Parsons's work had to take after a decade or two of great success. I would also say that Parsons's *Wirkungsgeschichte* has not yet come to an end. So this theory incorporates many, many potentials that still wait to be evaluated.

SOUNDINGS: Here is a seeming irony: in an age in which technology has vastly improved the means of communication, the existence of "the" genuine public has become more and more problematic. What in your view are the primary theological resources for addressing this anomaly? Do you perhaps find the work of Habermas to be helpful here?

WELKER: I learned quite a bit from the work of Habermas, although he has been much less influential on my thought than Whitehead or Luhmann. I think that Habermas still holds tight to the belief that the processes of moral communication and free associations will somehow win out. He has very modern parameters, nineteenth-century parameters, to sustain this hope. In the article you kindly published (*Soundings* 78.1 [Spring 1995]) I picked up die critique of recent American theologians (Tracy and Schüssler-Fiorenza), and their assertion that Habermas misses the religious and ethical dimensions, exactly the thick texture of symbolics that are so interesting to me. Habermas is strong in balancing merely systemic approaches, but in my opinion he still remains a nineteenth-century thinker.

But how to address these problems? This is a very, very difficult question. On the common sense level it is important to get rid of the post-metaphysical illusion of "the" public and talk about "publics," and understand the logics and the interplays of a diversity of publics. Here David Tracy has made a good start, but we get a little stuck with the delineation of the three publics for theology. There are more publics in our culture than that, and we have to do much more work to analyze their dynamics and the forms in which they interact. To be more specific, one of the big challenges I see is an analysis of the functions of mass media, especially the quasi-religious functions of mass media.

One of my assistants has just written a dissertation on this topic. He has been in the States, he has worked at the Annenberg School of Communication, and he has combined system-theoretical, ritual-theoretical, and other tools to make a step toward this analysis. This analysis is much more advanced in the States than in Germany. But these interplays and these competitions between the diverse publics — political, mass media public, religious public, aesthetical publics — are in need of analysis.

I have one guess concerning the mass media. I ask myself the question, why have competitive sports and popular music become so dominant in the media? The media are obviously under formative pressures to select these forms and present them again and again. But why?

My guess is that there is a deep underlying anthropological problem and question here. All our central anthropological conceptions — the person, subject, die "I," and so on — bring together and merge universality and radical individuality. So the "I" is both me here and now and the representation of the species. During modernity, although we had numerous challenges to the common or universal self in the name of autonomy, there was always in these challenges a refostering of the public and general self. This had to do with the stratified and institutionalized forms against which these challenges were directed. So if you challenged a dominant church or a dominant state in the name of autonomy, even these reactions and these disillusionments reconstitute a common, general self. At the same time people lived in thick communicative environments in which the striving for autonomy was heavily controlled, so the family, the large family, and also the small villages and states, these publics, put heavy control on development. So although the anthropological constellation always strove for radical individuality in modernity, the common aspect, the public aspect, remained very dominant.

In the twentieth century we have a shift, and I think the term "postmodern" marks this shift. Radical individuality becomes much more dominant, and since we no longer have strong stratified forms that we react against (except for perhaps the Roman Catholic Church and a few others), since the market is the dominant public, it is very difficult to gain ideas of the common self, of the human being as a common factor. So what we have to bring together in new ways is radical individuality and utmost publicity and commonality.

Here competitive sports and popular music enter, because they communicate radical individuality through bodily existence (the body is very important in competitive sports, obviously), and "conference" of emotions. So it is radical individuality on one side — you cannot be more radical than individual bodily existence and the conference of emotions. At the same time, we need universality, accessibility, universal accessibility, an objective system of measure, or at least the illusion that in principle I could jump like Michael Jordan, or you could sing like Kathleen Battle. The mass media are almost fixated on this point, and the publics as well, this latent question: what is the human being? How can we bring together in an orienting way utmost individuality and utmost universality?

This also shows why we have an apparently irreversible interest in pornography, publishing

the body and publishing the emotions. This is, so to speak, a cultural striving. But all this is still guesswork; I am in need of further investigations. But here again it seems to be the case that abstractions or constellations of abstractions constitute the cultural scene. This tells us why on a very basic, anthropological ground the mass media are not only successful, but why they have to support particularly these forms that are so dominant in our culture.

So what can theology do besides analyzing these processes? We have to pay much more attention to cult, to the cultic dimensions, to the difference between entertainment and feast in these forms. There is a strong interest, at least in European churches, in regaining forms of public festivity, .so although we have very low church attendance in the classic manner in churches, we have high attendance in the Kirchentag, and festive events in the community. There is also a strong interest in mother-child groups, bringing in religious tones and dimensions in early childrearing.

SOUNDINGS: Could you tell us more about this?

WELKER: Many of our churches are very astonished that more and more young mothers and children seek possibilities not only to use the spaces of the churches, but also to get some cultural and religious impulses in these mother-child groups. For example, in my own community we have an extremely low Sunday worship attendance but a high attendance in "Sunday school" for children (held on Saturdays). As soon as we have family worship, it is like the resurrection of the dead. Suddenly you have a big community of these children and their parents and a very lively worship. So I think these elements, at least in the European countries, deserve more attention and more creativity to build publics out of these groups that normally do not belong to the dominant, the paradigmatic public.

SOUNDINGS: It is in relation to its children that a community is able to say that it has a future. It is a recognition that the community must invest itself into some future time.

WELKER: And here of course the ecological and the employment crises — well, most of our crises — tell us that although our cultures are in one sense so obsessed with youth, we obviously have a distorted relation to younger generations, later generations, hence to our concrete future. And I think here in a non-moralistic but a creative way, we should work on

possibilities to reshape our culture. But of course this requires much more than simply a concern for the younger (this concern is quite strong in the families); it requires different visions of how we deal with our life, and how we will transmit our values and visions to the future world. So what to do with our life besides this centering on consumer entertainment and other such forms? We have a tendency — and I think this is a tendency born of helplessness — to absorb all things into the bodily and emotional existence, and much difficulty in generalizing it, and in attesting to the general self with these visions of what is human. How can we contribute? Once we have this imbalance between the general self and the concrete self, once it is really pushed very heavily down to the concrete side, we generate these types of helplessness. I think it is important to understand that our current culture has to work like it works because dominant figures of abstraction drive it in this direction.

SOUNDINGS: In the United States we seem to be having difficulty knowing how we will deal with that next generation. And with children, on the one hand, there is a very strong presumably religious and presumably Christian effort to emphasize "family values." But there is at the same time what we might call the capitalistic efficiency imperative — the imperative to make businesses more efficient, to increase profits, and so on. What this has led to in recent years is a decline in the earning power of the average family, so that middle class families have been driven to put both parents into the work force. Here we have had a drastic shift in American life. There are accordingly fewer opportunities for what we might call an old-fashioned relationship between parents to children. This is very complex obviously. Is this happening in Germany and Europe as well?

WELKER: Of course. I think with a certain time delay Europe repeats the American development. But we cannot alter the development and the change in the role structures of the family, but I think we have to look for more creative forms for dealing with this crisis out of the other systems — economic and religious systems. If we simply put more stress on the family, it will not work. It will only speed up the process of dissociation. So we have to develop forms of support — here the communities and churches, at least in Europe, face a great challenge — but maybe also the economic system should think about developing new forms. Why shouldn't the big firms, for example, develop kindergarten systems? Many duties were left to the public, and the political system was not able to handle them alone. I have great admiration for what is done in our schools, particularly the primary schools, in Germany

and at the moment in Princeton, New Jersey, where my own children have been more recently enrolled. The way they fight the pollution of the kids by mass media communication is simply amazing, how they struggle for the psychic health and creativity of the children among all these strong pressures. It deserves the greatest respect.

SOUNDINGS: You mention having been at Princeton. We would like to ask a question about your experience with the United States and with North America. You have been in residence at Chicago, at McMaster, and at Princeton, and you have remained in close contact with North American colleagues in several fields. Much of your recent work is focused on problems of pluralism. Do you think that problems and opportunities of pluralism emerge in a different way in America than in Europe? What particular resources are there in North American thought that are most helpful in thinking about matters of pluralism?

WELKER: The main discussion in Germany still tries to deal with pluralism with these ciphers of "plurality" and "multitude" and so on, still has the vague liberal integration models. So we have, of course, a plurality but no sense of the structures, no sense of the fruitful difference between systemic and associational forms which make for a very important dynamic in our societies. This has been much more carefully analyzed in the United States. But I have a sense that, for example, the churches in this country, maybe also vast regions of "common sense," still have the same difficulties we have in Europe in distinguishing creative and dissociative forms of pluralism. Then either a vague enthusiasm or a lot of fears come up, and pluralism can become a very negative word. It still remains a great task to bring the challenge down to common sense and to the diversity of publics: how to distinguish between creative and culturally productive forms of diversity and pluralism, and dissociative processes. So here we have a common task. But I find, particularly coming out of the Harvard tradition, much scholarly work extremely helpful. It is not only Whitehead, but also Talcott Parsons, Susanne Langer, Clifford Geertz, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Bernard Lonergan, and others who provide me with means of thought and inspiration. And I think it is characteristic for the American culture that you can launch titles like *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, *Clarity Is Not Enough*, and *Ethics After Babel*. I think here is a heightened awareness because you have already a more thoroughly built pluralistic structure, and also heavier tensions to endure, and stronger awareness of diversities within your huge country than we have had up until now in European countries.

SOUNDINGS: About your future projects: What is on your present agenda? Where is your systematic theology headed now?

WELKER: The concrete projects? I have just finished a book on creation, and I plan to write a small book under the title *What Happens in the Lord's Supper?* Then I would like to start again on the problem that has accompanied me for so long, the relation of Law and Gospel. I think I will do it in two parts; first a theology of the Law, and then a theology of the Gospel. So the interplay between religious, legal, moral, and other cultural forms will be examined. In principle, I am interested in working through the biblical traditions and at the same time addressing questions of contemporary culture, and thus reformulating the big topics of theology, of theological dogmatics on grounds which are at the same time very old and quite new.

SOUNDINGS: In *God the Spirit* you mention the problem of "das Feuilletonistische", an adjective which in your mind characterizes a certain kind of approach to the discussion of religious and cultural topics. Could you explain that term?

WELKER: "Das Feuilletonistische". It is the approach that picks up very pressing questions of contemporary culture in a "quickly plausible" way, what we have referred to earlier as the "sound bite," something that can be said in thirty seconds. We speak in Germany of "das Feuilletonistische" if we get these oversimplified contributions to actual culture that give some quick ideas that can offer some clue, but at the same time sublate and invest highly inappropriate plausibilizations. "Sunday supplement" is perhaps your American equivalent.

SOUNDINGS: What is the mission, in this context, of the scholarly journal, whether *Soundings* or other journals which deal in a broad sense with cultural matters? Does there remain a place for journals which try in a serious and sustained way to address matters of cultural importance? We are all vying for the attention of the reader, and the attention span is quite short. Even the most conscientious scholars have a difficult time reading more than a very small amount of the material that is available in all fields.

WELKER: I think that journals like *Soundings* have an extremely important place in the intersection between the learned or scientific world and the mass-media world. They set examples, standards, for both sides, because we are in need of plausibilizing our results for a diversity of publics. Whitehead once said that you might challenge common sense, and you might correct and transform it, but finally you have to do justice to it. This is one of the reasons, by the way, why it is important not to dismiss the grand traditions — here you have resources for addressing the common sense. The traditional symbolics have served to shape and communicate the common-sensical modes of thought beyond theoretical languages. You cannot wait till eternity to educate broader segments of diverse publics with Whiteheadian, Hegelian, or Heideggerian, or any other theory-language. So I think it is both for religious communication and also for the interdisciplinary journal to pick up the high challenge to address a diversity of scholarly publics on issues they have in common. But of course it is not easy to handle this task. There needs to be a certain strategy to find out the right selection of topics that should go together in a single issue. As soon as you have the right topics, people will read. This again calls for an interaction with the *Zeitgeist* and a way of decoding topics of a higher importance. And sometimes it also requires some trust in your own insights, because sometimes you might have discussions that are not as timely but are a bit ahead of their time, so one has to be patient and caring. You are always challenged to get the right tone, to get the right topics, and yet not simply jump on the last wave of the *Zeitgeist* but offer some normative challenge.

I once had a conversation with a German colleague, and he said to me, "Well, Herr Welker, you could do some wonderful things on Hegel, Whitehead, Luhmann, and others, why are you interested in the wandering people of God?" I encountered similar moods a couple of years ago at Harvard. I think these journals have the challenge to work with current and highly developed theories and at the same time to care for the wandering people of God — not only of the past, but of the present and the future.

**MICHAEL WELKER:
A SELECTED READING LIST**

EDITOR'S NOTE: The following books and articles have been selected from a comprehensive bibliography which includes over 100 entries.

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