

Theological Autobiography

AN INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL WELKER

Students working for a student magazine (the *Heidelberger TheologInnen Zeitung*—HTZ) within the Department of Theology at the University of Heidelberg initiated a series of interviews in which professors and other public people were asked questions under the slogan "Everything you always wanted to know about Mr./Mrs. So-and-So and were afraid to ask." One of the first persons interviewed was Professor Dr. Michael Welker, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Heidelberg, and an internationally known scholar. He has published several books and has been teaching temporarily in North American schools. Presently he is at Princeton Theological Seminary.

The interview, which took place in June of 1997, is being published here with his permission. The English translation* is by Gunnar Gericke, now a student at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, who conducted the original interview.

HTZ: Professor Welker, let us start out formally. How old are you?

MW: Close to mid-life crisis: 49 years old.

HTZ: Do you have any children?

MW: Yes, my wife and I have nine-year-old twin daughters.

HTZ: How long have you been at Heidelberg University?

MW: Since 1991 as a professor. I began my studies here in 1966.

HTZ: What is your favorite color?

MW: Blue.

HTZ: Why?

MW: Perhaps because the essence of my joy depends so much on sky and water. Two years ago I heard that in

Hamburg any color is liked as long as it has some kind of blue in it.

HTZ: Who is your favorite composer?

MW: For breakfast and other times, Bach or Corelli, while in a rather melancholic mood, Chopin, Mahler, and Dvorak, if I am able to concentrate on music for a longer time—which doesn't happen often unfortunately because of my work.

HTZ: Do you like to travel?

MW: No, but occasionally I like a change in location because it provides opportunities for concentration anew.

HTZ: What does America mean to you?

MW: America is a very impressive country—a difficult social-political experiment, a still young and fascinating culture, several excellent institutions of higher education. I have very good theological and personal friends there, and not least have had especially good parish experiences there, which give hope for the improvement of worship life, even for us.

HTZ: Why did you not become a newscaster?

MW: Because already by the time I was four years old I wanted to become a pastor, and because I decided against the theater explicitly after I had performed several times, even professionally, while I was in school.

HTZ: Where were you before coming to Heidelberg?

MW: I spent my childhood and schooling in Berlin and in Grünstadt an der Weinstrasse; then as a student in Heidelberg, in Tübingen for a short time, and then again in Heidelberg. I was Professor in Tübingen from 1983; in Münster from 1987 to 1991. This was interrupted by being a Guest Professor at McMaster University in Canada, at Princeton Theological Seminary, and an appointment at the Chicago Divinity School.

HTZ: What, in your view, is the greatest theological achievement of this century?

MW: What does "theological achievement" mean? If one thinks of a book that has been published, it would be Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*; if one thinks of an essay, it would be

Barth's "Tambacher Lecture." If one means a confessional, ecclesiastical text, it would be the Barmen Theological Declaration. If one is thinking of innovation or revision of teaching, I would think of Barth's doctrine of election, Moltmann's transcendentalizing of eschatology, or Gese's atonement theology; but also other important connections made by exegetes of the post-war era to systematic theology. Barth's *Dogmatics* is a great theological synthesis without rival; the opening of Roman Catholicism to the theology of the Reformers at Vatican II as a theological corrective has been without doubt a "great theological accomplishment."

HTZ: What philosophical work, aside from the that of Alfred North Whitehead, has influenced you most?

MW: Over the long run, Hegel's *Phenomenology* and Kant's *Critiques*; to a lesser extent, the writings of Fichte and Nietzsche.

HTZ: Why do you always use such complex ways of presentation in your lectures before you focus on the essentials?

MW: Because the "focus" should be adequate to the subject and not reductionistic.

HTZ: What does life after death mean for you?

MW: If you are asking the question only "for me": comfort.

HTZ: Why do you always mark the capital letters "H" and "K" with a line on top?

MW: You could say at least that I have omitted the one above the letter "V." I would be pleased with that.

HTZ: What is your view about tuition for students in Germany?

MW: It is a dangerous business. On the one hand, I have my doubts that we shall be able to finance an internationally compatible higher education system with taxes alone. On the other hand, I am afraid that the official policy that only students with wealthier parents are obligated to finance their school expenses will introduce tuition for everyone. The question about tuition should not become an issue that creates North American conditions in Germany. That

would decrease our efforts to offer everyone a fair educational opportunity.

HTZ: What are the next goals you still hope to achieve?

MW: I am not sure what you mean by saying "you still hope to achieve." Do you mean by "still" the meaning of "right away," or are you asking about the future? If you mean a kind of necessary step as a basis for a rather difficult accomplishment of goals, then I think immediately of the following.

I would like to convince my neo-protestant colleagues that a biblical theology, working at an interdisciplinary level, is indispensable for our ecclesial and cultural situation.

I would like to initiate a clarification of the well-known standard thesis of the German Protestant Church (the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland)—that we suffer under a "demolition of tradition and individualization." Individualization and personal development need to be distinguished. Demolition of tradition goes along with the process of individualization. But personal development needs close historical and social contexts.

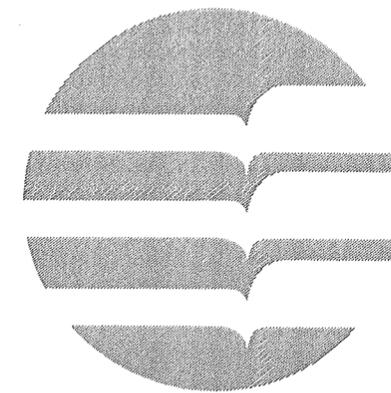
I would also like to get the general culture to distinguish clearly between "pluralism" and vague concepts of "plurality," "relativism," "individualism," etc. I would like to make clear that ecumenism is not the same as the ecumenism of functionaries or just relationships between Protestants and Catholics.

My next major projects include a lecture on Christology and two books. The one will be published with a Chicago colleague, *Beyond the Crisis of Christianity in the West*. The other project, that I have had in my luggage for a longer time, is on *The Righteousness of God—Law and Gospel*.

HTZ: What kind of necktie do you prefer?

MW: You will laugh. I prefer not to wear a tie at all. Otherwise I wear what is most handy in the closet.

HTZ: Professor Welker, thank you very much for this conversation.



BOOK REVIEWS

CONFESSING THE FAITH. Christian Theology in a North American Context.

By Douglas John Hall.
Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996.
511 pp. + indices.

This is the final of the ample volumes comprising Hall's trilogy. It is characteristically readable, engaging, and provocative and is a worthy successor and finale to the two earlier titles. In *Thinking the Faith* Hall argued that theology is inherently contextual, that there is no one-size-fits-all theology for every time and place. *How* one thinks the faith that is given to Christians will always reflect the social situation for which theology is constructed. Against the tendency to reduce the faith to *doctrinalism*, substituting dogma for living faith, Hall urges upon his readers the proposition that the social context of North America at the close of the century requires fresh thinking. Even those of his critics who wondered if his assessment of the context was adequate and whether his proposal was not warmed-over neo-orthodoxy were unanimous in agreeing that his project was an important contribution to an urgent task.

In *Professing the Faith*—Volume 2—Hall laid out what are for him the three main features of *what* the Christian faith entails: its understanding of the reality of God, the reality of creaturehood, and the reality of Christ. What

Christians believe about these realities is distinctive and must be re-thought. His way of developing each of these three is subdivided into three parts: first, what has the tradition taught about each; second, what challenges does the context raise for each; and finally, what is Hall's constructive proposal for faith's profession concerning God, the creatures, and Christ. Here some of his critics faulted him for his slight attention to other theological voices in North America in favor of German authorities. Orthodox theologians such as Zizioulas, Roman Catholics like David Tracy, feminist and black theologians, as well as American process theologians seem to contribute little to his version of a theology for a North American context. This is all rather odd because both his critiques of the western classical theological tradition and his proposals for present-day profession of the faith are similar to the work of other theologians who labor in the American context.

In the volume of this present review, Douglas John Hall turns his attention to (1) the church as the historical movement founded upon the reality of Christ; (2) ethics or the question of what it means to live as a Christian after the collapse of imperial Christendom; (3) how confessing the faith in the post-Christian context may be closer to the confessing church in the Nazi context of the 1930s in the sense that professing Christ today—while supporting the powers that be—is wholly inadequate if not apostasy; and (4) the reign of God and eschatology. One can read this volume as a summons addressed primarily to the college-educated leadership and middle-class supporters of mainstream Protestant establishment at the end of the century. It is a wake-up call aimed at renewing a moribund Protestant church to its mission in North America.

In the introduction, Professor Hall tightens his definition of what it means to confess the faith, namely, to be "thrust into an active engagement with that which threatens the life of our world." He recognizes that we can rarely be all that clear about what threatens the life of the world. Even the Nazi threat was not seen as such by most German Christians in 1934. "The demonic does not come with labels." The wheat and the weeds grow up together.

*Here slightly revised by Arland J. Hultgren for the *dialog* editorial staff.