

Michael Welker, *In God's Image: An Anthropology of the Spirit* (Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2021), \$ 21.00, pp: xii + 155, ISBN: 978-0-8028-7874-8.

Inferring justice, freedom and peace within a frame of natural theology

Michael Welker, a senior professor at Heidelberg, has been an important contributor to the science-religion literature, and this short book consists of his six 2019-2020 Gifford Lectures at Edinburgh University.

It represents a most extraordinary project. Welker seeks to take two theological motifs that seem to derive all their force from revelation – the beliefs that humans are created in the image of God, and can be transformed by the activity of God as Holy Spirit – and give them content (as befits the Gifford Lectures) from explorations that set aside revelation. Hence he is attempting 'a natural theology of the human and divine spirit'.

He begins by recognising challenges – human beings are 'seductible' and possessed of aggressive and destructive inclinations. It is therefore challenging to see them as in the image of God. The spirit cannot be reduced to any single manifestation or mode of action; it is 'multimodal'. Welker then proceeds to explore this multimodality in respect of justice, freedom, truth, and peace. Humans can strive for these things, and in their striving they can find themselves in the image of God, and recognise themselves as having received the outpouring of the divine spirit.

This is a short, accessible-seeming paperback with an arresting cover. But the prospective reader should not be deceived. Welker is a major European intellectual, and he draws very widely on sources including philosophy, history, and sociology as well as anthropology. The writing is clear, but the argument is demanding.

In his belief that human beings have access to this capability of developing communities characterised by justice, freedom, and commitments to truth and to peace, Welker makes some important points. He understands the ambivalence of nature – that life only ever survives and flourishes at the expense of other life. He is impressed by the sophistication of the anthropology he finds in the Pauline literature, but he also recognises that religion has a dubious track-record through history. He rejects the natural law tradition as a source for his natural theology, and wants to draw instead on some little-used work of the young Hegel. On peace Kant is his major source, but he also turns to Whitehead for an understanding of the love that can give itself away.

Ultimately, I found myself unconvinced by this natural theology of the spirit. Welker's sense of the possibilities for justice, freedom and peace simply does not seem vindicated by human experience. Christians hold to these possibilities because of revelation, especially the vision of the Kingdom in the Gospels and of the body of Christ in Paul, but it is very hard to read them off from the flux of the world except through this lens. Perhaps this links with other developments in recent natural theology (for instance the work of Alister McGrath): only out of a well-formed doctrinal lens can the world – either of nature or culture – be interrogated in a way that is truly theologically generative.

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