


The Global Network of Research Centers for Theology, Religious, and Christian Studies (2007–2019)

Theology Today
2019, Vol. 76(3) 189–193
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DOI: 10.1177/0040573619858863
journals.sagepub.com/home/ttj



Michael Welker

University of Heidelberg, Germany

The Initial Phase and Backgrounds

The idea to create a Global Network of Research Centers for Theology, Religious, and Christian Studies was put into practice by Konrad Schmid (teaching Old Testament in Zürich) and myself (teaching Systematic Theology in Heidelberg) during a common stay at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton in 2007. We invited colleagues from established, promising universities across the globe with whom we had already cooperated well in the past. The idea was to create bottom-up partnerships with at least three and not more than 15 research-active and motivated English-speaking colleagues in each place, with modest time commitments and maximum potential impact. Fruitful academic cooperation among colleagues and doctoral and postdoctoral students without language barriers, financial responsibilities, and administrative complications across the globe was the goal.

The expected commitments were: (1) To occasionally be open to send or receive doctoral or postdoctoral students, recommended by colleagues in the Global Network, for a short research leave. Regrets are always possible; no financing and no teaching responsibilities, just hospitality (for example a place in the doctoral seminar) and some advice with respect to academic resources and contacts. (2) To be eventually interested in short (2–3 days) weekend compact seminars with colleagues on joint research interests (with advanced and doctoral students,

Corresponding author:

Michael Welker, University of Heidelberg, Heidelberg 69117, Germany.

Email: michael.welker@ts.uni-heidelberg.de

publication optional). (3) Openness to offer a reading course from time to time, should a small group of international students be present and interested in it.

We asked each colleague for a few lines on his or her research and teaching profiles, a photo, and a list of up to ten publications. The response was amazing. In addition to the colleagues and schools we approached, a few universities expressed their interest to join this circle. Some of the schools could not come up with at least three English-speaking research-active participants in the field. But still we have now 45 more or less active universities and schools involved.

Several good experiences in North America, Germany, and Switzerland gave birth to this initiative. Konrad Schmid and I had been several times guests at the Center of Theological Inquiry in Princeton and enjoyed the academic interaction for several months among 10 or 12 international colleagues. I was also a fellow at the Institute for the Advanced Study of Religion (now the Martin Marty Center) at the University of Chicago Divinity School, which not only hosted a group of international colleagues for a weekly academic exchange, but also included some promising doctoral students. In 1996 the president of the University of Heidelberg made me director of the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum Heidelberg (IWH) for twice five years. It was founded as an endowment at the 600th anniversary of the university in 1986. This place hosted and still hosts 50–70 research events every year—in all fields, from mathematical stochastics to Egyptian death tombs, to bioethical problems, to the dialogue of law and religion.

The key impulse, which also generated strong support for the first phase of the development of the Global Network, was the establishment of the Research Center for International and Interdisciplinary Theology (FIIT) at the University of Heidelberg in 2005.

The Research Center for International and Interdisciplinary Theology, University of Heidelberg (FIIT) as a First Promoter of the Global Network

In 2005 we were able to secure a 12-room villa in the middle of the Old City of Heidelberg, with a quiet garden and a nice view on the famous castle as a research center. Two rooms for small consultations and workshops and six computerized desks for scholars in residence can be offered. Next door is the Internationales Wissenschaftsforum for larger conferences and symposia, and a 250,000-book theological library is just three minutes away. Since 2007, about 70 colleagues from Brazil, China, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, the UK, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Israel, Korea, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, South Africa, Taiwan, Tanzania, and the USA—many of them members of the Global Network—have made good use of this opportunity, some more than once. They stayed between a few weeks and a whole year.

The FIIT started with eight units of research, led by Heidelberg professors. It now has 15 active units which cooperate in various formats and constellations

(Theology and Natural Sciences; Theology and (Bio)Ethics; Theology and Law; Religion and Education; Media-Related Anthropology; Theology and Archaeology; Jewish–Christian Dialogue; Anthropology and Ethics in Early Christianity; Monasteries in the High Middle Ages; Religion in America; Potentials of Confessional Differentiations; Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology; Theological Diaconal Studies and Social-Scientific Research; Pastoral Care and Psychology; Liturgical Praxis and Religious Transformation).

The FIIT created a website of the Global Network, which will be administered in the future by the University of Zürich. It also secured with the help of the German Karl Schlecht Foundation 30 globally advertised small stipends (€6000 each) for doctoral students and postdocs, to help finance a one-term move from one place to another, which will now be organized by a colleague from Fordham University.

With the help of two foundations, first the American John Templeton Foundation and, after five years, the German Manfred Lautenschlaeger Foundation, we were able to establish a globally announced and evaluated Award for Theological Promise. We invite applications and nominations for academic books (doctoral dissertations or first postdoctoral works) on the topic “God and Spirituality” (broadly understood). Applications came from many fields, not only theology, religious studies, philosophy, sociology, or psychology of religion, but also Egyptology, fields of ancient history, history in general, literature, media studies, and the dialogue of science and religion. Christian studies of all denominations, Jewish studies, Islamic and Hindu studies, all applied. A group of 23, later 20, evaluators with excellent reputations (many of them members of the Global Network) from 15 different countries, different academic fields and religious affiliations offered strict multiple evaluations. Each year, 10 prizes of \$10,000 each in the beginning, later €3000 each, were awarded. A festive celebration in the Great Hall of the University was followed by a two-day colloquium on the next research projects of the winners. The award enjoys an excellent reputation. About 90 percent of the previous 110 winners already hold a professorship (assistant, associate, or full; reader or senior reader). Some of the winners are already members of the Global Network.

The core of the FIIT’s activities and radiations were international and interdisciplinary research projects, most of them involving many members of the Global Network. Several of them followed a format created at the Center of Theological Inquiry: a series of four or five consultations, leading to a book publication. A science and religion multi-year dialogue resulted in a book: *The Depth of the Human Person: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Eerdmans, 2014). A project connecting theology, sciences, and law led to the publication *Concepts of Law in the Sciences, Legal Studies, and Theology* (ed. M. Welker and G. Etzelmueller, Mohr Siebeck, 2013). Results of a dialogue between theologians of all fields, ethicists, political and cultural studies came out under the title *Quests for Freedom: Biblical–Historical–Contemporary* (Neukirchen, 2015, 2nd. ed. Wipf & Stock, 2019). A series of consultations relating to religion and economy resulted in *Money as*

God? The Monetization of the Market and its Impact on Religion, Politics, Law, and Ethics (ed. J. von Hagen and M. Welker, Cambridge University Press, 2014). Interreligious dialogues in Heidelberg and Chicago led to the book *Images of the Divine and Cultural Orientations: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Voices* (ed. M. Welker and W. Schweiker, EVA Leipzig, 2015).

Scholars of the FIIT took part in four consultations with colleagues of Notre Dame University on *Reformation and Reformations* and organized a multi-year Wolfgang Huber Guestprofessorship for Ecumenical Theology (2018, supported by the German EKD) to foster a long-term connection between the Global Network partners of Heidelberg and Notre Dame. Many two-shot projects were created with Global Network members from the USA on “Political Theology: Old and New” and on “The Holy Spirit and the Dialogue with Pentecostal Theology.” With Orthodox theologians and scientists, mainly from Russia, we worked on concepts of the Spirit in different academic and religious contexts. The FIIT launched consultations with Chinese colleagues in the Global Network on the dialogue between science and religious studies, and with Korean colleagues on concepts and practices of freedom and human and divine justice. Sponsored by the Karl Schlecht Stiftung, we developed the project “Entrepreneur Ethics in South East Asia.” Young professors from Korea, Japan, the People’s Republic, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, who had received their doctoral degrees in Heidelberg, conducted interviews with CEOs of internationally active firms and corporations in their countries. We then brought the five academics and eight CEOs to Heidelberg together and evaluated the interesting results. With colleagues from the Global Network in Hungary and South Africa we held and published dialogues on Religion and Civil Societies in Germany and South Africa, and Religion and Civil Societies in Germany and Hungary. With colleagues from the Free University of Amsterdam we engaged in dialogues on “The Holy Spirit: Creativity and Novelty in God.” All these activities resulted in book publications, in some cases in collections of journal articles.

Numerous two-day weekend compact seminars with colleagues from the Global Network on various topics, with advanced students, doctoral students, and post-docs cannot be listed here. They were not only relevant for research, but also for teaching, the promotion of Heidelberg and international doctoral students, and for the creation of substantial academic connections between students from different countries and students and teachers from other parts of the world.

A final big project should be mentioned that was conceived by John Witte and me at Emory University. We started with a series of consultations on “Character Formation, Ethical Education, the Communication of Values in Late Modern Pluralistic Societies.” We explored “The Impact of the Market on Character Formation, Ethical Education and the Communication of Values in Late Modern Pluralistic Societies,” greatly helped by the Bonn Economist Jürgen von Hagen. Australian, South African, and other North American members of the Global Network joined us in a kind of steering committee. We held consultations on the Impact of Religion, the Impact of Law, the Impact of Academic Research,

which will all result in book publications. Consultations on the Impact of the Family, the Impact of Education, the Impact of the Media, the Impact of the Defense Systems, the Impact of the Medical and Healthcare System, and the Impact of Politics will follow. Several of these consultations are supported by the Alonzo McDonald Agape Foundation. Some, but not all members of the Global Network will take part in these projects. They will provide another example of what we intend to achieve with the Global Network: a lively international, interdisciplinary, and interreligious academic cooperation on vital issues for the enlightening and flourishing of humankind.

Heidelberg–Zürich–Hong Kong–Stellenbosch: Getting Really Global

In 2009 we held the first meeting of representatives of members from the different schools involved in the Global Network in Heidelberg. We worked on a joint memorandum of understanding which declared the limited responsibilities and the constructive intentions of the Network. In 2016 we met at the University of Zürich not only for further planning, but also reflecting on the common topic “Religion and Civil Societies.” It became clear that we had to overcome the strong centering on Heidelberg and the activities of the FIIT in order to gain long-term international vitality and sustainability. A meeting in Hong Kong in 2019 (followed by a visit of four universities in Shanghai), carefully organized by Konrad Schmid and Tobias Brandner, helped us to take this important step. In strong cooperation with new colleagues from Hong Kong, we first worked together in the Divinity School of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and in the Hong Kong Institute of Sino-Christian Studies on the common topic “The Family in Cultural Transitions.”

We then elected a new Steering Committee with Konrad Schmid (Zürich, Switzerland), responsible for the general organization of the Global Network and its presentation on the web; Sonia Wong (Hong Kong), responsible for realistic listing, updating, and expanding of participating individual members and schools (globalnetresearch.org); J. Patrick Hornbeck (Fordham, USA), responsible for the search for support of stipends that help doctoral students and postdocs in the Global Network to spend a semester at another school relevant to their research, and also potential support for joint seminars and small research projects among participating scholars; Louis C. Jonkers (Stellenbosch, South Africa), responsible for the organization of the next meeting of representatives from the different schools in the Global Network 2022 in Stellenbosch.

Although the FIIT will continue to offer places for Scholars in Residence at the University of Heidelberg and will also continue to organize the Manfred Lautenschlaeger Award for Theological Promise, a new phase in the short history of the Global Network was started, with better shared responsibilities and a hopefully even stronger global outreach.