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# Bringing faith into a new context

## An obituary for Hans Waldenfels SJ

The fundamental theologian and missiologist Hans Waldenfels died on 12 November 2023 in his native city of Essen. Born Johannes Bernhard Maria Waldenfels on 20 October 1931, Hans Waldenfels entered the Jesuit novitiate immediately after graduating from high school in 1951. From 1953 to 1956, he studied philosophy at Berchmans College of Philosophy in Pullach near Munich. Already during his time at Berchmanskolleg the superiors of the order became aware of Hans Waldenfels' extraordinary talents and sent him to Japan in 1956. After two years of language studies in Hiroshima, where he first met Hugo Makibi Enomiya-Lassalle, Hans Waldenfels studied theology at the Catholic Sophia University in Tokyo from 1960 to 1964. He was ordained a priest in the Japanese capital on 18 March 1963 by Cardinal Tatsuo Doi.

From 1965 to 1968, Waldenfels continued his studies as part of his doctorate, first at the Gregoriana in Rome and then at the University of Münster. When he first came to Rome in autumn 1965, the last session of the Second Vatican Council had just begun, which Waldenfels experienced first-hand as a young Jesuit. As a result, he met numerous Council theologians during the first year of his doctoral studies in the "Eternal City". His dissertation published in 1969 with the title "Revelation. Das Zweite Vatikanische Konzil auf dem Hintergrund der neueren Theologie", published in 1969, was inspired by Karl Rahner, who had suggested that Waldenfels look into the history of the origins, the background and the first two chapters of the then still "young" Constitution on Revelation, *Dei Verbum*.

In 1976, Waldenfels completed his habilitation at the University of Würzburg with his habilitation thesis on Buddhist-Christian dialogue. The following year, 1977, Hans Waldenfels was appointed to the Chair of Fundamental Theology, Theology of Religions and Philosophy of Religion at the University of Bonn, which he held until his retirement in 1997. During his work in Bonn, Waldenfels developed the approach of contextual fundamental theology, which pursues theology in the awareness that theological statements are always dependent on place and time. In his contextual fundamental theology, Waldenfels attempted a theological foundation of the Christian faith in today's world "context". He saw this as being characterised by a rapprochement between the Christian churches, an intensified Christian-Jewish dialogue, an encounter between religions, but also a turning away from religions and a strengthening of

atheism and humanist ideologies. Waldenfels recognised that Christianity and the Christian churches must reposition themselves in the face of increasing religious multi-optionality in Western European societies characterised by a "post-Christian modernity". In doing so, he saw the challenge of expressing the Christian faith in theology in such a way that theology can also be understood and, at best, comprehended by people of other faiths, atheists, and agnostics in foreign, non-Christian context.

Hans Waldenfels was a distinguished, sometimes controversial theologian and a Christian characterised by a deep piety, whose theological work in the fields of fundamental theology, religious studies and missiology was concerned with making faith in Jesus Christ capable of speaking in specific contexts. Last but not least, he rendered great services to the International Institute for Missiological Research (IIMF), of which he was chairman for twenty years.

Klaus Vellguth