

Transforming the powers: the continuing relevance of Walter Wink

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Any attempt to transform a social system without addressing both its spirituality and its outer forms is doomed to failure.



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“But the bank is only made of man. No, you’re wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it.” [John Steinbeck](#), *The Grapes of Wrath*.

Most people want a world without militarism, poverty, sexual exploitation, white supremacy and the despoiling of nature. Yet we find it so difficult to achieve such a world. One reason is that our social, economic and political structures powerfully resist transformation, as Steinbeck made clear in his description of the banking system as a monster that cannot be controlled.

The American theologian [Walter Wink](#) (who died in 2012) made it his life’s work to help us understand these monsters and how to loosen their hold through an interpretation of Christianity that makes the core insights of biblical faith available to social change agents, both religious and secular.

Trained as a New Testament specialist, Wink is best known for his “Powers trilogy” beginning with *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* in 1984, followed by *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* in 1986, and ending with the magisterial *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, published in 1992. He also wrote several shorter works that flesh out the trilogy’s core insights.

Wink argues in *Naming the Powers* that the language of “Principalities and Powers” in the New Testament refers to human social dynamics—institutions, belief systems, traditions and the like. These dynamics, or what he calls “manifestations of power,” always have an inner and an outer aspect. “Every Power tends to have a visible pole, an outer form—be it a church, a nation, an economy—and an invisible pole, an inner spirit or driving force that animates, legitimates, and regulates its physical manifestation in the world. Neither pole is the cause of the other. Both come into existence together and cease to exist together.”

In Wink’s view, we need such an integrated, inner-outer awareness in order to understand the world we live in and act effectively as agents for healing and transformation. “Any attempt to transform a social system without addressing both its spirituality and its outer forms is doomed to failure,” as he puts it in *Engaging the Powers*. What’s more, in Wink’s understanding all systems of power have the potential to be just or unjust, violent or nonviolent. “The Powers are good. The Powers are fallen. The Powers must be redeemed.”

“We cannot affirm governments or universities or businesses to be good unless at the same time we recognize that they are fallen,” he continues “We cannot face their malignant intractability and oppressiveness unless we remember that they are simultaneously a part of God’s good creation. And reflection on their creation and fall will appear only to legitimate these Powers and blast hope for change unless we assert at the same time that these Powers can and must be redeemed.”

This cycle of personal and institutional redemption provides a pathway to deep social change, but Wink refuses to pit the political against the personal. If either side is missing, he insists, genuine transformation won’t be possible. To illustrate what this means in concrete terms, take his analysis of contemporary North America, which focuses on the role of violence in US culture. Wink challenges what he calls the “myth of redemptive violence”—the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, and that might makes right. His work explores how to combat this myth and further a social order that is free from domination.

A major problem in American culture has long been the devotion of an incredible amount of resources to the military-industrial complex. As a consequence, the US projects force as a solution to conflict in ways that only heighten global insecurities through a constant stream of ‘blowbacks.’ These social dynamics are fueled in part by the socialization of Americans into a mentality that insists on responding to perceived enemies with fear and violence. Wink’s analysis helps us to see how our refusal to

confront the darkness within ourselves on both the personal and the societal levels blinds us to alternative approaches to enmity that can lead to a growth in self-knowledge and open up pathways to reconciliation.

His thinking about “domination systems” helps us to understand the contemporary context of large-scale violence in America and beyond, a system that entraps us all in the amazingly self-destructive dynamic of violence responding to violence, and on and on and on in this same vein. And his analysis of the role that the Principalities and Powers play in human culture helps us to make sense of why our structures are so destructive of human wellbeing.

As another example, take the crises of climate change and environmental degradation. Thus far we have not found a way to wrest control of our economic systems away from the ideologies and institutions that are driving us over the cliff of irreversible and catastrophic ecological change. Something in these systems resists change—but it is also true that our personal addictions to wasteful lifestyles and our deference to political and corporate leaders render us largely impotent.

As these examples show, the inner or spiritual Powers are not separate heavenly or ethereal realities but rather the inner aspects of material or tangible manifestations of power in relation to nature—as well, we may note, in relation to prisons, the police, racial and sexual violence, debates over gun control, militarism and the ‘War on Terror.’ As Wink writes in *Naming the Powers*:

“The ‘principalities and powers’ are the inner or spiritual essence, or gestalt, of an institution or system. The ‘demons’ are the psychic or spiritual power emanated by organizations or individuals or subaspects of individuals whose energies are bent on overpowering others;... ‘gods’ are the very real archetype or ideological structures that determine or govern reality and its mirror, the human brain; and... ‘Satan’ is the actual power that congeals around collective idolatry, injustice, or inhumanity, a power that increases or decreases according to the degree of collective refusal to choose higher values.”

In Wink’s understanding, the biblical worldview allowed its writers to comprehend the spiritual nature of human structures. The language of demons, spirits, principalities and so on helped these writers to recognize that social life has both seen and unseen elements, and that both need to be taken into account to understand the dynamics that shape our lives.

But that biblical worldview has fallen by the wayside with the development of modern consciousness and cannot simply be re-appropriated. It “is in many ways beyond being salvaged, limited as it was by the science, philosophy, and religion of its age” as Wink puts it in *Unmasking the Powers*.

However, the materialistic, modern worldview has itself proven inadequate in understanding and addressing complex social realities, since it cannot recognize the possibility that the spiritual Powers are real. This is crucial because, when we fail to respect the reality of the Powers we become most

vulnerable to their manipulations—as, for example, when we are blind to the ways in which the myth of redemptive violence pervades ways of thinking about how best to deal with conflict and insecurity.

“A reassessment of these Powers—angels, demons, gods, elements, the devil—allows us to reclaim, name, and comprehend types of experiences that materialism renders mute and inexpressible. We have the experiences but miss their meaning. Unable to name our experiences of these intermediate powers of existence, we are simply constrained by them compulsively. They are never more powerful than when they are unconscious. Their capacities to bless us are thwarted, their capacities to possess us augmented. Unmasking these Powers can mean for us initiation into a dimension of reality ‘not known, because not looked for,’ in T.S. Eliot’s words....The goal of such unmasking is to enable people to see how they have been determined, and to free them to choose, insofar as they have genuine choice, what they will be determined by in the future.”

Therefore, we must adjust our worldview to take in the inter-related realities of internal and external power structures and make this the basis of our actions. With some success, through his writings, sermons and workshops, Wink tried to help Christians to revive the biblical worldview in a postmodern context, though his insights remain relatively unknown outside of the progressive wing of the church, at least in North America.

By challenging us to look beyond and beneath material power structures but never to ignore them, Wink’s work helps us to understand how worldviews shape our perceptions of the issues that surround us, and how important it is that we revise our modern worldview if we want to move more effectively towards human wellbeing. Only an “integral worldview,” as he calls it, will enable us to remain modern people while also recognizing the interconnections of all things and the spirituality that infuses all of creation.

Along with providing necessary insights into why we are so dominated by the forces of violence, Wink’s analysis also provides an essential sense of hope and empowerment. As we break free from the illusions of the Domination System, we can be freed to recognize that not only are the Powers corruptible (or “fallen” in his language), but that they are also redeemable. So Wink’s ideas, sobering as they are, are not a counsel of despair. The Powers can—and must—be successfully resisted and transformed.



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