

What the modern prophets are saying

The Wink Papers

Naming the Powers (1984) - Unmasking the Powers (1986) - Engaging the Powers (1992)

Walter Wink - Fortress Press, Philadelphia

Walter Wink was a Protestant American theologian whose audience, it would seem, consisted of keen Bible readers who were inclined to take the biblical texts literally. In his celebrated trilogy, *Naming the Powers*, *Unmasking the Powers* and *Engaging the Powers*, Wink pioneered the attempt to focus Christian attention on the oppressive and, yes, deeply unchristian way those who govern us behaved in the dominant West.

Wink's motivation for doing this was intensely personal. He introduces his trilogy by describing a fact-finding mission he and his wife undertook in Latin America 'to observe the churches' responses to human rights violation and hunger':

We stayed in barrios and favelas, talking with priests and nuns struggling with the everyday crush of oppression...At the end of the trip I became ill...Worse, I was overcome by despair...The evils we had encountered were so monolithic, so massively supported by our own government...that it scarcely seemed that anything could make a difference...How could the writers of the New Testament insist that Christ is somehow, even in the midst of evil, sovereign over the Powers?

Later, in *Engaging the Powers*, he poses the related question, 'How could our (US) government brandish its Christian credentials when its behaviour was more like that of the ancient Babylonians?' Violence was for the religion of ancient Mesopotamia what love was for Jesus. According to the Babylonian myth, Tiamat, female representative of the older generations is killed by Marduk, one of the younger gods:

He catches Tiamat in a net, drives an evil wind down her throat, shoots an arrow which bursts her distended belly and pierces her heart...(p.14)

And so forth. Wink goes on to observe that this myth indicates that the victory of order over chaos is achieved by means of brutal violence. He continues:

This primordial myth is far from defunct. It is as universally present and earnestly believed today as at any time in its long and bloody history. I will now suggest that it is the dominant myth in contemporary America (more influential by far than Judaism or Christianity), that it enshrines a cult of violence at the very heart of public life...(p.17)

An indictment of a nation state can hardly get more radical than this, but it is his own nation that Wink is accusing:

I love my country passionately; that is why I want to see it do right. There is a valid place for sensible patriotism...There is a place for a sense of destiny as a nation. But it can be authentically embraced and pursued only if we separate ourselves from the legacy of the combat myth...It can perform that

task, paradoxically, only by abandoning its messianic zeal and accepting a more limited role within the family of nations. (pp.30/31)

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The whole of Wink's trilogy might be described as a cry of prophetic anguish caused by the chasm between the behaviour the (his) US government and of the powers in general, and what he understood as God's purposes for the world. But his theology is many-faceted and I can't provide a rounded view of it in the limited space available here. Instead, I will offer a few set pieces as a 'taster' to Wink's discourse. Readers who are attracted by the taster are, of course, invited to turn to the four Wink Papers in Part 2 of the website Engaging the Powers: (engagingthepowers.org).

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About the Powers

Power is vested in nation states and their governments, in international institutions such as the World Trade Organisation, in banks, financial businesses and in the mega-corporations whose wealth often exceeds that of smaller nation states. We can, and should be, much exercised with the ways in which they abuse their power, but Wink reminds us, in *Unmasking the Powers*, that they are also forces for stability and structure in society.

If anything we are guilty of continually underestimating the capacity of the Powers to violate the public interest on behalf of private profits and the sheer lust for power. But the Powers are also no less the good creation of good God than we are, and they are no more fallen than we. If we can experience redemption, so can they, though by virtue of their greater complexity, far less simply. In short, radical pessimism about the Powers needs to be balanced by a view of grace more radical still. But whether this redemption can take place in history is an open question...They can recover a sense of their divine vocation and manifest flashes of what will be when God is effectively sovereign over all creation. (p.98)

Under the heading of *The Angels of the Nations*, Wink indicates how God's will sometimes shines through. But he also has very valuable insights into the 'inner' dynamics of institutions, which are discussed along similar lines in Part 3 of our website under the title *Beyond the Received Wisdom*. Says Wink:

Every organisation is made up of human beings who make its decisions and are responsible for its success or failure. But these institutions tend to have a superhuman quality. Although created and staffed by humans, decisions are not made so much by people as for them...Because the institution usually antedates and outlasts its employees, it develops and imposes a set of traditions, expectations, beliefs and values on everyone it employs. Usually unspoken, unacknowledged and even unknown, this invisible transcendent network of determinants constrains behaviour far more rigidly than any printed set of rules ever do. (Naming p.110)

It would have been intriguing if Wink had lived a little longer and provided us just now with an analysis under the title *The Angels of the Banks* !

From this reasoning, Wink makes a tripartite proclamation:

The Powers are good; the Powers are fallen; the Powers will be redeemed.

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Our collusion with the Powers

How are we to challenge the Powers? Wink sets out to answer this question by focusing on our collusion with the power of the Powers. This is not so much a matter of consciously avoiding support as a consumer for certain multi-national corporations from time to time. It goes much deeper to aspects of our basic socialisation; that is to say, it is at its most powerful when it penetrates below the level of consciousness.

Wink's argument centres on the paradoxical statement of Jesus: 'Whosoever seeks to gain his life shall lose it, but whosoever loses his life will preserve it.' (Luke 17:33). When we died with Christ, Wink explains, we were already dead; we were subservient to the Powers. By dying to that death, we gain our real lives.

We are dead insofar as we have been socialised into patterns of injustice. We died, bit by bit, as expectations foreign to our essence were forced upon us. We died as we became complicit on our own alienation and that of others. We died as we grew to love our bondage, to rationalise, justify and even champion it.

There is no helping it, children must be socialised. Rules, customs, habits must be learned, and learned under the supervision of the Domination System. And there is no helping it; at some point we must begin to become ourselves. To do that, we who are dead must die. (*Engaging the Powers* p.157)

Nowadays, says Wink, the church treats this theme as a problem of the ego. However,

Rebirth is not a private inward event only. For it also includes the necessity of dying to whatever in our social surroundings has shaped us inauthentically. We must also die to the Domination System in order to live authentically. (p.158)

The unquestionably authentic religious experience of 'rebirth' often fails to issue in fundamentally changed lives because this social dimension of egocentricity is not addressed. (p.159)

He continues:

We should be confessing our complicity with the Powers, the way we benefit from the injustices they structure to our advantage...What we need is not to be cleaned up and sent right back into a corrupt society, but to be lifted out of it altogether, by a sovereign act of God who wipes the slate clean and offers us a new reality, the reality intended for us from the beginning of the world. (p.160)

The task is not ego-conquest by means of the ego (a persistent delusion of many of the 'new spiritualities') but ego-surrender to the redemptive initiatives of God in God's struggle against the anti-divine powers of the world. (p.161)

How, *how on earth*, can we poor mortals hope to confront such a demanding and overwhelming task?. Not by 'ego-conquest' says Wink; not through the struggles of our own efforts. None of this, no challenge to the power of the Powers, will succeed by our own efforts alone. Wink offers here a well-known passage from Ephesians:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armour of God. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the rulers of this present darkness...Therefore take the whole armour of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. (Ephesians 3: 12-14)

Poor, mortal twenty-first century human beings will surely exclaim: 'But this is just words; they offer no practical help, no indication of how they might become 'real' '. Wink's answer is 'Pray!'. 'Everything can be changed by prayer'. 'More waffle', mutter twenty-first century humans. But Wink offers some very valuable insights about the power of prayer. Here are three of them:

The power of prayer (all quotations from *Engaging the Powers*)

God as Intercessor

Wink examines the idea of 'God as Intercessor'. We must recognise, he says, that it is God, rather than ourselves who initiates prayer, and that it is God's prayer, not ours, that answers the world's needs. We are always preceded in intercession. God is already praying within us...We join with God in a prayer already going on in us and in the world. (p.304)

Wink builds what follows round Romans 8: 26 and 27 (Phillips translation with revisions):

The Spirit also helps us in our present limitations. For example, we do not know how to pray worthily, but God's spirit within us is actually praying for us in those agonising longings ('groans') which cannot find words.

The groaning of the Spirit within us is related to the groaning of the created world. We are inundated by the cries of an entire creation; the millions now starving to death each year, the tortured, the victims of sexual abuse or battering, the ill. But that is not all...(p.305)

But

We human beings are far too frail to bear all this pain. The solution is not avoidance, however...What we need is a portable Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, where we can unburden ourselves of this accumulated suffering...But we must not try to bear the sufferings of the creation ourselves. We are to articulate these longings and let them pass through up to God. Only the heart at the centre of the universe can endure such a weight of suffering.

Reaching 'outwards' and 'upwards'

The act of praying is itself one of the indispensable means by which we engage the Powers. It is, in fact, that engagement at its most fundamental level, where the secret spell over us is broken and we are re-established in a bit more of that freedom which is our birthright and potential. (*Engaging* p.297)

Prayer takes us into the realm beyond the world, to the transcendent. In basic Christian language, the realm beyond the world to which we aspire is simply 'heaven'.

Says Wink, referring to the process theologian A N Whitehead:

To paraphrase Whitehead, 'Heaven is the home of the possibles', not simply in the abstract sense that our potentialities have been planted in us like seeds and that it is up to us to make them sprout. Quite the contrary, our own given potentiality, like that of the acorn is always merely a repeat of the past, to go on being and doing what we have always been and done before. The heavenly possibilities are presented to us as a lure challenging us to go beyond our conditioning and habits, our collusion in oppressing or being oppressed...

A poetic description of transcendent reality

Intercession, says Wink, infuses the suffocating atmosphere of the present with the air of time yet to be.

There is a marvellous image of intercession in the Book of Revelation. Jesus Christ, the Lamb, is opening one by one the seals the Scroll of Destiny (Revelation 6:5-8). As he opens the first four seals, the sorry spectacle of human violence is laid bare; the endless cycle of conquest, civil war, famine and death, depicted by the Four Horsemen (p.298)

But

Now, when the Lamb broke the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. I saw the seven angels who stand in the presence of God; they were given seven trumpets. Another angel came and stood by the altar, holding a golden censer. He was given much incense to offer with the prayers of all God's people on the golden altar in front of the throne, and the smoke from the incense from the angel's hand went up before God with his people's prayer. (Rev.8:1-5)

For Wink, this is no mere flight of the imagination; it is a poetic description of transcendent reality. He explains:

Heaven itself has fallen silent. The heavenly hosts and celestial spheres suspend their ceaseless singing so that the prayers of the saints on earth can be heard. Human beings have intervened in the heavenly liturgy. The uninterrupted flow of consequences is dammed for a moment. New alternatives become feasible. The unexpected suddenly becomes possible, because people on earth have invoked heaven...and have been heard...(p.299)

