

The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium

by Walter Wink; notes by Doug Muder¹⁾

Walter Wink is a nonviolent political activist and a professor of biblical interpretation at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York. He has promoted his vision of nonviolent resistance in Pinochet's Chile and South Africa under apartheid, as well as in the United States. *The Powers That Be* describes the theological basis of his social and political beliefs, which he sees as springing out of the teachings of Jesus. *Powers* reinterprets the angel mythology of the Bible as an ancient way of understanding and dealing with the corporate intelligences embodied in social institutions like companies, churches, nations, and cultures. Wink sees these institutional intelligences as "fallen angels" -- having forsaken their life-affirming mission in order to promote their own interests. Supporting all of the fallen institutions is "The Domination System," a cultural vision in which a dominating hierarchy is the only conceivable source of order and "good" violence is the only defense against "bad" violence. The Domination System plays the role of Satan in Wink's mythological interpretation. The mission of Jesus, according to Wink, is the overthrow of the Domination System. He sees a nonviolent "Third Way" in Jesus' teachings, a way that is neither passive acceptance of domination nor an (ultimately self-defeating) violent revolution against it. Wink re-examines several of Jesus' most famous statements and finds practical lessons in political theater and nonviolent resistance.

I break this book into the following sections: The Introduction and first two chapters introduce Wink's concept of "the Powers" and use it to describe the fallen state of the contemporary world (i.e., the Domination System). Chapter 3-5 find in the teachings of Jesus a vision that competes with and responds to the Domination System. Chapters 6-8 deal with the strategy of nonviolent action, respond to misunderstandings of it, and give examples of its practical application. (This section is largely detachable from the theological underpinnings of the first two sections.) The final section of the book discusses the inner life of the nonviolent activist, focusing on the spiritual challenge of learning to love one's enemies and the usefulness of prayer as a spiritual discipline for the nonviolent activist.

Introduction

The Powers That Be are more than just the people who run things. They are the systems themselves, the institutions and structures that weave society into an intricate fabric of power and relationships. the Powers surround us on every side. They are necessary. They are useful. ... But the Powers are also the source of unmitigated evils. [page 1]

One legacy of the rampant individualism in our society is the tendency to react personally to the pain caused by institutions. ... But to a high degree, corporate decisions are dictated by larger economic forces. ... Managers are, in fact, more or less interchangeable. Most people in managerial positions would tend to make the same sorts of moves. ... Executives can be more humane. But a company owner who decides to raise salaries and benefits will soon face challenges from competitors who pay less. Greater forces are at work -- unseen Powers -- that

¹⁾ Quotations from the book are in Times New Roman, while my comments are in Arial Narrow. Quotations are followed by numbers in brackets that indicate the page number (in the 1998 paperback edition) where the quote occurs.

shape the present and dictate the future. [pages 2-3]

Religious tradition has often treated the Powers as angelic or demonic beings fluttering about in the sky. Behind the gross literalism of that way of thinking, however, is the clear perception that spiritual forces impinge on and determine our lives. ... I was prepared to wager that our ancestors were in touch with reality when they spoke about the Powers, and that they might even know something our society had lost, spiritually blinded as it is by a materialism that believes only in what it can see, hear, taste, smell, or touch. [page 3]

Wink found significance in the fact that messages in Revelations are addressed to the "angels" of the seven churches, not to the churches themselves. The angels seemed to represent the corporate personalities of the churches, something that Wink has observed in modern churches.

Furthermore, that personality was real. It wasn't what we call a "personification" like Uncle Sam or the Quaker on the box of oats. [page 3]

In other Jewish and Christian sources I discovered ancient sages who believed that everything in creation has its own angel. That meant, I concluded, that everything has both a physical and a spiritual aspect. The Powers That Be are not, then, simply people and their institutions, as I had first thought; they also include the spirituality at the core of those institutions and structures. If we want to change those systems, we will have to address not only their outer forms, but their inner spirit as well. [page 4]

The angel of an institution is not just the sum total of all that an institution is (which sociology is competent to describe); it is also the bearer of that institution's divine vocation (which sociology is not able to discern). Corporations and governments are "creatures" whose sole purpose is to serve the general welfare. And when they refuse to do so, their spirituality becomes diseased. ... I had never been able to take demons seriously. ... But if the demonic is the spirituality produced when the angel of an institution turns its back on its divine vocation, then I could not only believe in the demonic, I could point to its presence in everyday life. [pages 5-6]

Pages 6-10 describe the progress of Wink's understanding of the Powers through his political work in Chile and South Africa, resulting in his commitment to nonviolent direct action.

Chapter One. Identifying the Powers

This book ... sees spirit -- the capacity to be aware of and responsive to God -- at the core of every institution, every city, every nation, every corporation, every place of worship. [page 13]

The world is, to a degree at least, the way we imagine it. When we think it to be godless and soulless, it becomes for us precisely that. And we ourselves are then made over into the image of godless and soulless selves. [page 14]

Understanding worldviews is key to breaking free from the ways the Powers control people's minds. ... As I am using the term, worldviews are not philosophies, theologies, or even myths or tales about the origin of things. They are the bare-bones structures with which we think. They are the foundation of the house of our minds on which we erect symbols myths, and systems of thought. ... Normally, a worldview functions on an unconscious level. People are unaware of its existence. It is just the way things are. [pages 14-15]

Pages 15-22 outline the worldviews that Wink believes have existed in the West. They are: 1) The Ancient worldview, which is reflected in the Bible. In this view everything on Earth has its counterpart in Heaven, and vice versa. 2) The Spiritualist worldview, in which matter is an illusion and only spirit is real.

3) The Materialist worldview, in which spirit is an illusion and only matter is real. 4) The Theological worldview, popular in seminaries, in which God exists in a realm disconnected from the physical. 5) The Integral worldview, in which Heaven and Earth are "the inner and outer aspects of a single reality." Wink chooses worldview (5).

Worldviews determine what we are allowed to believe about the world. Most of us have chunks of each of these worldviews in our psyches. ... The important point is that *we may be the first generation in the history of the world that can make a conscious choice between these worldviews*. We can decide which worldview best describes the world as we encounter it, and whether we still want to be controlled by the others. [page 22]

When people tell of their experiences of evil in the world, they often lapse into the language of the ancient worldview. Demons and angels are depicted as separate beings soaring about in the sky rather than as the spirituality of institutions and systems. When I suggest restating the same thought using an integral worldview, they often respond, "Oh, yes, that's what I meant." ... People use the old way of putting it merely because they lack a better way to say it. When they are provided a more adequate language, they instantly recognize that these new words fit their experience. ... A new conceptual worldview is *already* in place, like the wiring in the hard drive of a computer, and can be activated by its mere articulation. [pages 24-25]

In New Testament times, people did not read the spirituality of an institution directly from its outer manifestations. Instead, they projected its felt or intuited spiritual qualities onto the screen of the universe and perceived them as cosmic forces reigning from the sky. ... But for many modern Westerners it is impossible to maintain that worldview. Instead, fundamentalists treat the Powers as actual demonic beings in the air, largely divorced from their manifestations in the physical or political world (the theological worldview), and secularists deny that this spiritual dimension even exists (the materialistic worldview). [pages 25-26]

Our task, working within the emerging [integral] worldview, is to withdraw those projections from on high and relocate them in the institutions where they actually reside. ... The demons ... are not *up there* but *over there*, in the socio-spiritual structures that make up the one and only real world. [page 26]

When a particular power becomes idolatrous -- that is, when it pursues a vocation other than the one for which God created it and makes its own interests the highest good -- then that Power becomes demonic. The spiritual task is to unmask this idolatry and recall the Powers to their created purposes in the world. ... And the church must perform this task despite its being as fallen and idolatrous as any other institution in society. [page 29]

The relevance of the Powers for an understanding of evil should by now be clear. Evil is not just personal but structural and spiritual. It is not simply the result of human actions, but the consequence of huge systems over which no individual has full control. Only by confronting the spirituality of an institution *and* its physical manifestations can the total structure be transformed. [pages 30-31]

Put in stark simplicity: The Powers are good. The Powers are fallen. The Powers must be redeemed. These three statements must be held together, for each by itself is not only untrue but downright mischievous. We cannot affirm governments or universities or businesses as good unless at the same time we recognize that they are fallen. We cannot face their oppressiveness unless we remember that they are also a part of God's good creation. And reflection on their creation and fall will seem to legitimate these Powers and blast any hope for change unless we

assert, at the same time, that these Powers can and must be redeemed. But focus on their redemption will lead to utopian disillusionment unless we recognize that their transformation takes place within the limits of the fall. [pages 31-32]

Fallen does not mean depraved, as some Calvinists alleged. It simply refers to the fact that our existence is not our essence: we are, none of us, what we are meant to be. We are alienated from God, each other, nature, and our own souls, and cannot find the way back by ourselves. But the situation is not without hope, for what sinks can be made to rise again. [page 33]

Naming the Powers identifies our experiences of these pervasive forces that dominate our lives. Unmasking the Powers takes away their invisibility, and thus their capacity to coerce us unconsciously into doing their bidding. Engaging the Powers involves joining in God's endeavor to bend them back to their divine purposes. [pages 34-35]

The task of redemption is not restricted to changing individuals, then, but also to changing their fallen institutions. That redemption will culminate in the salvation, not just of people, but of their nations as well. ... Personal redemption cannot take place apart from the redemption of our social structures. [page 35]

Chapter Two. The Domination System

If the Powers were each isolated from the other, we might approach their transformation piecemeal, one at a time. Unfortunately, they are linked together in a bewilderingly complex network, in what we can call the Domination System. In that system, even Powers that directly compete with each other for territory or markets preserve the system by the very interactions by which they try to destroy each other. Like a massive family system, no institution or organization is allowed to "get better" without repercussions from other, more pathological Powers. [page 36]

From this perspective, "Satan" is the world-encompassing spirit of the Domination System. [page 27]

[The Domination System] is characterized by unjust economic relations, oppressive political relations, biased race relations, patriarchal gender relations, hierarchical power relations, and the use of violence to maintain them all. ... The basic structure has persisted now for at least five thousand years, since the rise of the great conquest state of Mesopotamia around 3000 BC. [pages 39-40]

In culture after culture, human destiny was driven in a direction that few would have consciously chosen. ... Societies found themselves locked in a struggle for dominance from which no one could escape. Defense against a powerful aggressor required a society to become more like the society that threatened it. ... No one person or group of people imposed the Domination System on us; it came wholly uninvited. People simply stumbled into a struggle for power beyond their ability to avoid it or to stop. [pages 41-42]

A domination system must have a domination myth, however, a story that explains how things got this way. For a story told often enough, and confirmed often enough in daily life, ceases to be a tale and is accepted as reality itself. And when that happens people accept the story even if it is destroying their lives. The story that the rulers of domination societies told each other and their subordinates is what we today might call the Myth of Redemptive Violence. It enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. It is one of the oldest continuously repeated stories in the world. [page 42]

If a god is what you turn to when all else fails, violence certainly functions as a god. ... The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the real myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion in our society today. [page 42]

Wink summarizes how the myth appears in an endless series of children's cartoons: An indestructible hero is doggedly opposed to an irreformable and equally indestructible villain. Nothing can kill the hero, though for the first three-quarters of the comic strip or TV show he (rarely she) suffers grievously and appears hopelessly doomed, until, miraculously, the hero breaks free, vanquishes the villain, and restores order until the next episode. [page 43]

The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the story of the victory of order over chaos by means of violence. ... Peace through war, security through strength: these are the core convictions that arise from this ancient historical religion, and they form the solid bedrock on which the Domination System is founded in every society. [page 48]

The psychodynamics of the TV cartoon or comic book are marvelously simple. Children identify with the good guy so that they can think of themselves as good. This enables them to project out onto the bad guy their own repressed anger, violence, rebelliousness, or lust, and then vicariously to enjoy their own evil by watching the bad guy initially prevail. ... When the good guy finally wins, viewers are able to reassert control over their own inner tendencies, repress them, and reestablish a sense of goodness without coming to any insight about their own inner evil. The villain's punishment provides a catharsis; one forswears the villain's ways and heaps condemnation on him in a guilt-free orgy of aggression. Salvation is found through identification with the hero. [page 49]

Pages 49-53 give examples of this myth in movies, television, and sports.

[The myth's] presence everywhere is ... a function of values endlessly reinforced by the Domination System. By making violence pleasurable, fascinating, and entertaining, the Powers are able to delude people into compliance with a system that is cheating them of their very lives. [page 53]

[In nationalism], a Power [i.e., the nation] is made absolute. There can be no other gods before the nation. [page 56]

Pages 56-59 describe how Christianity has been coopted by nationalism.

The myth of redemptive violence thus uses the traditions, rites, customs, and symbols of Christianity to enhance both the power of a select wealthy minority and the goals of the nation, narrowly defined. This national security type of church is nothing more than the compromised court chaplain of the national security state. [page 59]

Overwhelmed by the incomprehensible size of corporations, bureaucracies, universities, the military, and media icons, individuals sense that their only escape from utter insignificance lies in identifying with these giants and idolizing them as the true bearers of their own human identity.

Salvation through identification: whether it be in cartoon shows or westerns or confrontations with foreign powers, one's personal well-being is tied inextricably to the fortunes of the hero-leader. Right and wrong scarcely enter the picture ... The alternative -- ownership of one's own evil and acknowledgment of God in the enemy -- is for many simply too alien a concept. [page 60]

This myth speaks *for* God; it does not wait for God to speak. It invokes the sovereignty of

God as its own. ... It does not seek God in order to change; it embraces God in order to prevent change. [page 61]

Chapter Three. Jesus' Answer to Domination

Jesus challenged the Domination System of his day right where it affected men and women in the routine of their lives. ... His words still challenge the manifestations of the Domination System today. [page 63]

Pages 64-80 quote extensively from the gospels to demonstrate that Jesus rejected hierarchies, called for economic equity, rejected violence, broke customs that treated women as inferiors, broke purity regulations that separated people from each other, challenged the patriarchal vision of the family, and rejected the belief that God requires blood sacrifices.

[Jesus] went beyond revolution. His struggle was against the basic presuppositions and structures of oppression -- against the Domination System itself. Violent revolution fails because it is not revolutionary enough. It changes the rulers but not the rules, the end but not the means. Most of the old repressive values and delusional assumptions remain intact. What Jesus envisioned was a world transformed, where both people and Powers are in harmony with the Ultimate and committed to the general welfare. ... It is no wonder that the radicality of Jesus was soon watered down by the church. But his truth has proved to be inextinguishable. [page 81]

Chapter Four. Breaking the Spiral of Violence

Pages 83-93 describe how a scapegoating mechanism perpetuates violence, and how Christian theology has lost Jesus' message by incorporating scapegoating into its theology -- with Jesus' death-for-our-sins as the ultimate sacrifice of the scapegoat.

One does not become free of the Powers by defeating them in a frontal attack. Rather, one dies to their control: "Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it." (Luke 17:33) Here also the cross is the model: we are liberated, not by striking back at what enslaves us -- for even striking back reveals that we are still controlled by violence -- but by a willingness to die rather than submit to its command. [page 93]

We are dead insofar as we have been socialized into patterns of injustice. We died, bit by bit, as expectations foreign to our essence were forced upon us. We died as we began to become complicit in our own alienation and that of others. We died as we grew to love our bondage, to rationalize, justify, and even champion it. We died as we set ourselves in the place of God and tried to control our own lives. [pages 93-94]

Rebirth is not a private, inward event only. For it includes the necessity of dying to whatever in our social surroundings has shaped us inauthentically. We must die to such things as racism, false patriotism, greed, and homophobia. We must, in short, die to the Domination System in order to live authentically. [page 95]

Depth psychology and Eastern mysticism alike have spoken profoundly of the death of the ego. ... What these approaches have not made clear is the degree to which the ego is also a web of internalized *social* conventions, a tale spun by the Domination System that we take in as a self-definition. We are not only possessed by the ego as an autonomous *inner* complex, but also by an *outer* network of beliefs that we have internalized. The unquestionably authentic religious experience of "rebirth" often fails to issue in fundamentally changed lives because this social

dimension of egocentricity is not addressed. ... Dying to one's ego can be just another false spirituality unless it involves dying to the Powers. [pages 95-96]

What is required is the crucifixion of the ego, wherein it dies to its illusion that it is the center of the psyche and the world, and is confronted by the greater self and the universe of God. The ego, to its surprise, discovers itself alive on the other side of annihilation, organized around a new center that is coextensive with the universe. [page 96]

Dying to the Powers is not, finally, a way of saving our souls, but of making ourselves expendable in the divine effort to rein in the recalcitrant Powers. ... [Jesus] drew a line in the sand and asked if we would step across -- step out of one entire world where violence is always the ultimate solution, into another world, where the spiral of violence is finally broken by those willing to absorb its impact with their own flesh. [page 97]

Chapter Five. Jesus' Third Way

This chapter a re-interpretation of the following passage: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile." (Matthew 5:38-41)

Traditionally this has been interpreted as advocating passive submission to oppression. Wink claims that when each of these situations is described in historical context, it becomes clear that Jesus is advocating a creative kind of nonviolent opposition to oppression, not submission.

Many otherwise devout Christians simply dismiss Jesus' teachings about nonviolence out of hand as impractical idealism. And with good reason. ... Jesus' teaching, viewed in [the usual] way, is impractical, masochistic, and even suicidal -- an invitation to bullies and spouse-batterers to wipe up the floor with their supine Christian victims. Jesus never displayed that kind of passivity. Whatever the source of the misunderstanding, such distortions are clearly neither in Jesus nor his teaching. ... The gospel does not teach nonresistance to evil. Jesus counsels resistance, but without violence. [page 98-99]

The rest of the chapter takes the Matthew quotation line by line. Wink holds that "Do not resist an evildoer" is simply a mistranslation. He goes back to the Greek and explains why he prefers the translation in the Scholars Version "Don't react violently against the one who is evil."

To understand "turn the other cheek" in context, Wink observes that a right-handed blow to the right cheek is a backhand -- a shaming blow that a master would give to a slave who could not strike back. Turning the left cheek invites a blow with a fist.

But only equals fought with fists, as we know from Jewish sources, and the last thing the master wishes to do is to establish this underling's equality. This act of defiance renders the master incapable of asserting his dominance in this relationship. He can have the slave beaten, but he can no longer cow him. ... In that world of honor and shaming, the "superior" has been rendered impotent to instill shame in a subordinate. He has been stripped of his power to dehumanize the other. [page 102]

To understand "give your cloak" the modern reader needs to grasp two things that Jesus' audience would have known: that the Roman system of taxation was driving farmers into debt and ultimately off their land, and that the defendant who gave up his cloak would leave the courtroom naked, with the plaintiff holding his undergarment.

The debtor had no hope of winning the case; the law was entirely in the creditor's favor. But the poor man has transcended this attempt to humiliate him. He has risen above shame. At the same time he has registered a stunning protest against the system that created his debt. ... This is guerrilla theater! The entire system by which debtors are oppressed has been publicly unmasked. The creditor is revealed to be not a legitimate moneylender but a party to the reduction of an entire social class to landlessness and destitution. [page 105]

The Powers That Be literally stand on their dignity. Nothing deflates them more effectively than deft lampooning. By refusing to be awed by their power, the powerless are emboldened to seize the initiative, even where structural change is not immediately possible. This message, far from counseling an unattainable otherworldly perfection, is a practical, strategic measure for empowering the oppressed. [page 105]

Shortly before the fall of political apartheid in South Africa, police descended on a squatters' camp they had long wanted to demolish. They gave the few women there five minutes to gather their possessions, and then the bulldozers would level their shacks. The women, apparently sensing the residual puritanical streak in rural Afrikaners, stripped naked before the bulldozers. The police turned and fled. So far as I know, that camp still stands. [pages 105-106]

A Roman soldier had the legal right to force a non-citizen to carry his pack for up to a mile. This right was exercised primarily by the low-ranking soldiers, who could not afford mules or horses. The soldier who had a civilian carry his pack more than a mile had broken the military code, and might be disciplined by his centurion.

[By offering to carry the pack a second mile] the oppressed have once more seized the initiative. They have thrown the soldier off balance by depriving him of the predictability of his victim's response. ... If he has enjoyed feeling superior to the vanquished, he will not enjoy it today. Imagine a Roman infantryman pleading with a Jew to give back his pack! The humor of this scene may have escaped us, but it could scarcely have been lost on Jesus' hearers who must have been delighted. [page 108]

To those whose lifelong pattern has been to cringe before their masters, Jesus offers a way to liberate themselves from servile actions and a servile mentality. And he asserts that they can do this *before* there is a revolution. There is no need to wait until Rome is defeated, peasants have land, or slaves are freed. They can begin to behave with dignity and recovered humanity *now*, even under the unchanged conditions of the old order. [page 109]

In short, take the law and push it to the point of absurdity. These are, of course, not rules to be followed legalistically, but examples to spark an infinite variety of creative responses in new and changing circumstances. They break the cycle of humiliation with humor and even ridicule, exposing the injustice of the system. [page 110]

Jesus, in short, abhors both passivity and violence. He articulates, out of the history of his own people's struggles, a way in which evil can be opposed without being mirrored. [page 111]

Chapter Six. Practical Nonviolence

This chapter argues against the objection that Jesus' nonviolence is impractical idealism. It begins by enunciating two principles of nonviolent action: 1) The means must be consistent with the ends; and 2) Respect for the rule of law. He then summarizes the successes of nonviolent action, including the revolutions that ended communism in eastern Europe.

Wink then moves to personal nonviolent strategies, and contradicts what he regards as myths about nonviolence: Nonviolence can be confrontational (as when a battered wife has her husband arrested), coercive (as when protesters force the police to decide between doing nothing and acting violently), and can seek out conflict.

A caution, however: if we are to make nonviolence effective, we will have to be as willing to suffer and be killed as soldiers in battle. Nonviolence is not a way of avoiding personal sacrifice. Indeed, it requires that we take that sacrifice on ourselves rather than inflicting it on others. [page 118]

Before engaging in nonviolent action, however, there is spiritual work that needs to be done. We want to be able to oppose evil without evil making us over into its likeness. [page 122] The way of nonviolence, the way Jesus chose, is the only way that is able to overcome evil without creating new forms of evil and making us evil in turn. [page 127]

Chapter Seven. Beyond Pacifism and Just War

This chapter is an argument against the doctrines of "just war" that Christians have used since St. Augustine to justify war.

The new reality Jesus proclaimed was nonviolent. ... His was not merely a tactical or pragmatic nonviolence seized upon because nothing else would have worked against the Roman Empire's virtual monopoly on power. Rather, he saw nonviolence as a direct expression of the nature of God and of the new reality breaking into the world from God. [page 128]

Nonviolence is not just a means to the realm of God. It is a quality of that realm itself. [page 129]

Christianity's weaponless victory over the Roman Empire resulted in the weaponless victory of the empire over the gospel. A fundamental transformation occurred when the church ceased being persecuted and became instead a persecutor. Once a religion attains sufficient power in a society that the state looks to it for support, the religion must also, of necessity, join in the repression of the state's enemies. For a faith that lived from its critique of domination and its vision of a nonviolent social order, this shift was catastrophic, for it could only mean embracing and rationalizing oppression. [pages 129-130]

Wink lists the criteria commonly required to proclaim a just war and finds that they are seldom met, even in wars that the churches support. Still, he finds use in the criteria.

I believe [these criteria] are indispensable in the struggle to mitigate the violence of war. *It is not the criteria themselves that are problematic, but the fact that they have been subordinated to the myth of redemptive violence.* In that mythic context, the just-war criteria have normally been used to justify wars that are unjustifiable. Freed from that context, and subordinated to the church's vocation for nonviolence, these criteria might play a role in preventing wars and reducing the level of violence in wars that cannot be averted. [pages 133-134]

Is there a third way here as well, one that affirms the pacifist's nonviolence and the just-war theorist's concern for moral accountability in war? I believe there is, but it involves a prior commitment to nonviolence, and a far more rigorous use of the just-war criteria than has usually been the case. [page 134]

Wink recasts the just-war criteria as violence-reduction criteria, refusing to admit that they justify a war.

If the church were unambiguously committed to nonviolence, its appeal to governments and insurgents to reduce the barbarity of war would have more credibility. [page 141]

Just war theory has been not so much mistaken as mismarried to the ideology of redemptive violence. Its pagan roots were never sufficiently purged of their origin in the Domination System. [page 143]

No doubt the objection may be raised that affirmation of nonviolence by the churches would be simplistic, that ethical judgments in the real world of the Powers are far too complex to adopt a fixed ethical stance. This objection, I must confess, was one of the main reasons I resisted committing myself to nonviolence for so many years. I have slowly come to see that what the church needs most desperately is precisely such a clear-cut, unambiguous position. Governments will still wrestle with the option of war, and ethicists can perhaps assist them with their decisions. But the church's own witness should be understandable by the smallest child: we oppose violence in all its forms. [page 144]

Chapter Eight. But What If ... ?

This chapter examines the hypothetical examples that are usually presented to advocates of nonviolence.

When we make survival the highest goal and death the greatest evil, we hand ourselves over to the gods of the Domination System. We trust violence because we are afraid. And we will not relinquish our fears until we are able to imagine a better alternative. ... The vast majority of Christians reject nonviolence, not only because of confusion about its biblical foundations, but because there are too many situations where they cannot conceive of it working. ... Millions of years of conditioning in the fight or flight response have done nothing to prepare us for this "third way" of responding to evil. [pages 145-146]

Wink first observes that no strategy reliably solves the hypothetical situations. Nonviolent responses to muggers or rapists or terrorists do not always lead to favorable outcomes, but neither do violent responses. That said, he then relates stories (too long to repeat here) in which creative nonviolent tactics resolved such situations without harm to either the assailant or the intended victim.

The brutalities of the Nazis stand for many people as the ultimate refutation of nonviolence. Surely, they reason, only violence could have stopped Hitler. The facts indicate just the opposite. Nonviolence *did* work whenever it was tried against the Nazis. [pages 151-152]

Examples are given from Bulgaria, Finland, Norway, and Holland.

The problem with war or violence as a last resort is that we may be less likely to look to God for a way through if we have already settled in advance that violence is an option. Faith requires at times marching into the waters before they part. (Joshua 3:15-16) Those who have not committed themselves to nonviolence in advance and under all circumstances are less likely to discover the creative nonviolent option in the desperate urgency of a crisis. They are already groping for the trigger, just when they should have been praying and improvising. [page 154]

Our capacity to discover creative nonviolent responses in moments of crisis will depend, to some degree at least, on whether we rehearse them in our everyday lives. [page 154]

When an oppressive regime has squandered every opportunity to do justice, and the capacity of the people to continue suffering snaps, then the violence visited on the nation is a kind of apocalyptic judgment. In such a time, Christians have no business judging those who take up

violence out of desperation. The guilt lies with those who turned justice aside and did not know the hour of their visitation. But while the church must sincerely wish the revolutionaries success, it has no business legitimating the violence of war. [page 158]

The truth is, nonviolence generally works where violence would work, and where it fails, violence, too, would usually fail. ... But nonviolence also works where violence would fail, as in most of the nonviolent revolutions of 1989-1991. [pages 159-160]

Chapter Nine. The Gift of the Enemy

American culture is presently in the first stages of a spiritual renaissance. And to the extent that this renaissance is Christian at all, it will be the human figure of Jesus that galvanizes hearts to belief and action, and not the Christ of the creeds or the Pauline doctrine of justification by grace through faith. And in the teaching of Jesus, the sayings on nonviolence and love of enemies will hold a central place. Not because they are more true than any others, but because they are crucial to the struggle to overcome domination without creating new forms of domination. I submit that they ultimate religious question today should [be] ... "How can we find God in our enemies"? [page 161]

No false prophet can ever conceive of God as being a God who loves the enemy. [page 162]

Jesus, by contrast [to John and to the later church], understood judgment not as an end but as a beginning. ... Divine judgment is intended not to destroy, but to awaken people to the devastating truth about their lives. [page 163]

Our solidarity with our enemies lies not just in our common parentage under God, but also our common evil. ... We too, like them, betray what we know in our hearts God desires for the world. We would like to identify ourselves as just and good, but we are a mix of just and unjust, good and evil. If God were not compassionate toward us, we would be lost. And if God is compassionate toward us, with all our unredeemed evil, then God must treat our enemies the same way. ... If, however, we believe that the God who loves us hates those whom we hate, we insert an insidious doubt into our own selves. Unconsciously we know that a deity hostile toward others is potentially hostile to us as well. [page 165]

Wink takes issue with the translation of Matthew 5:48, which concludes the passage about loving enemies: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." He claims that "whole" would be a better translation of the Greek than "perfect," and even that would not quite be right.

The perfectionist reading of Jesus' text about loving enemies leads to a crowning irony: the attempt to will to love enemies in order to become perfect makes the love of enemies a psychological impossibility. If we have to be perfect in order to earn God's grudging love, then what do we do with those aspects of ourselves that are not perfect and that we know never will be? ... We must repress all that evil. ... We are therefore systematically prevented from loving our enemies because we need them as targets for our projections. [pages 167-168]

We can learn about our repressed flaws by observing what we project onto our enemies.

The enemy is thus not merely a hurdle to be leapt on the way to God. The enemy *can be* the way to God. [page 171]

The command to love our enemies reminds us that our first task towards oppressors is pastoral: to help them recover their humanity. ... It is not enough to become politically free; we must also become human. Nonviolence presents a chance for all parties to rise above their present

condition and become more of what God created them to be. [page 172]

Loving our enemies may seem impossible, yet it can be done. At no point is the inrush of divine grace so immediately and concretely perceptible as in those moments when we let go of our hatred and relax into God's love. ... There is a subtle pride in clinging to our hatreds as justified, as if our enemies had passed beyond even God's capacity to love and forgive. ... If God can forgive, redeem, and transform me, I must also believe that God can work such wonders with anyone. Love of enemies is seeing one's oppressors through the prism of the reign of God -- not only as they are now, but as they can become: transformed by the power of God. [pages 175-179]

Chapter Ten. Prayer and the Powers

Wink presents prayer as a spiritual discipline, similar to the disciplines of athletes.

The slack decadence of culture-Christianity cannot produce athletes of the spirit. [page 180]

Prayer is never a private inner act disconnected from day-to-day realities. It is, rather, the interior battlefield on where the decisive victory is won before any engagement in the outer world is even possible. ... Unprotected by prayer, our social activism runs the danger of becoming self-justifying good works. As our inner resources atrophy, the wells of love run dry, and we are slowly changed into the likeness of the beast. [page 181]

When we pray, we are not sending a letter to a celestial White House, where it is sorted among piles of others. We are engaged, rather, in an act of co-creation, in which one little sector of the universe rises up and becomes translucent, incandescent, a vibratory center of power that radiates the power of the universe. History belongs to the intercessors, who believe the future into being. If this is so, then intercession, far from being an escape from action, is a means of focusing for action and creating action. [pages 186-187]

Pages 188-192 discuss a story from the book of Daniel, in which the angel who carries God's response to Daniel's prayers is delayed for 21 days by the angel of Persia.

This is an accurate depiction, in mythological terms, of the actual experience we have in prayer. ... Prayer involves not just God and people, but God and people and Powers. What God is able to do in the world is hindered to a considerable extent by the rebelliousness, resistance, and self-interest of the Powers exercising their freedom under God.

God is powerful to heal; but if corporations flush PCBs and dioxin into the water we drink, or [many more such examples] God's healing power is sharply reduced. ... God does want people to be free to become everything God created them to be. But when one race enslaves another to labor in its fields, ... [more examples] ... then what is God to do? We may pray for justice and liberation, as indeed we must, and *God hears us on the very first day*. But God's ability to intervene against the freedom of these rebellious creatures is sometimes tragically restricted in ways we cannot pretend to understand. [pages 192-193]

If the Powers can thwart God so effectively, can we then speak of divine providence in the world? ... Is a limited God really God at all? We have to face these questions, because our capacity to pray depends on some kind of working idea of God's providential care for us. [page 193]

In such a time [as the Nazi era in Germany], God may appear to be impotent. Perhaps God is. God may be unable to intervene directly, but nevertheless showers the world with potential coincidences that require only a human response to become miracles. When the miracle happens,

we feel that God has intervened in a special way. But God does not intervene only occasionally. Go dis the constant possibility of transformation pressing on *every* occasion, even those that are lost for lack of a human response. [pages 194-195]

The wheels of justice may turn slowly, but they are inexorable. ... The sobering news that the Powers can thwart God is more than matched by the knowledge that our intercessions will ultimately prevail. [page 195]

Prayer that ignores the Powers ends by blaming God for evils committed by the Powers. But prayer that acknowledges the Powers becomes an indispensable aspect of social action. We must discern not only the outer, political manifestations of the Powers, but also their inner spirituality, and lift the Powers, inner and outer, to God for transformation. Otherwise we change only the shell and leave the spirit intact. [page 197]

This is the goal: not to be free *from* the Powers, but to *free* the Powers. Jesus came not just to reconcile people to God despite the Powers, but to reconcile the Powers themselves to God. ... We need to escape idolatry, not this planet. We do not seek to rid ourselves of subsystems and structures in order to secure an individualistic paradise on earth or an afterlife in heaven. We seek, rather, to relate these systems to the One in and through and for whom they exist. [page 199]

Questions for discussion:

How real do you think the Powers are? Are they metaphoric abstractions? Supernatural beings? Something in between?

How useful is it to think about an institution as a spiritual entity that is something more than the sum of the individual spirits of its members? How useful is the terminology of "the Domination System" and "the myth of redemptive violence"?

Does a belief in the Powers undercut the notion of individual responsibility? Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

Comment on this quote from page 35: "Personal redemption cannot take place apart from the redemption of our social structures."

Is Wink's case for the effectiveness of nonviolent action persuasive? Is his interpretation of Jesus' sayings persuasive?

Wink's prescription for freedom from the Powers -- that we accept the threat of death rather than obey or rebel -- does it work without a belief in an afterlife?

Accepting the effectiveness of nonviolent tactics in specific situations, do you believe that it could be the organizing principle of an entire society? In other words, (assuming we could get there) is the concept of "God's domination-free order" workable? Or would dominance and violence quickly reassert itself?