

# Editor's Introduction

Walter Wink died on May 10, 2012, at the age of 76, leaving behind a legacy of progressive Christian thought and practice that powerfully integrated social justice concerns and biblical scholarship. Throughout his long and productive career, Wink wore many hats, all of them well—a biblical scholar who made significant contributions to the discipline and brought interdisciplinary skills to the study of the Bible; a prolific writer of books, essays, and articles that speak to the inquiring ordinary man or woman as well as to practitioners and scholars; an activist for peace and nonviolent but aggressive resistance to evil who “walked the talk” and placed himself at risk in Latin America and South Africa; a pastor with a pastor’s heart; a champion of gay rights; and a much in demand speaker and workshop leader with his wife, June Keener Wink.

Walter Wink’s life and work demonstrate the reciprocal relationship between one’s biography and one’s bibliography. Indeed, one of his chief critiques of many of his colleagues in the guild of biblical scholars was the pervasive “false consciousness” of objectivism that separates “theory from practice, mind from body, reason from emotion, knowledge from experience.”<sup>1</sup>

The ideology of objectivism encouraged and enabled a false perception of distance between life and work that blinded scholars to the impact that biography necessarily has on bibliography. As Wink noted in the first chapter of *The Human Being*:

“Objective view” is itself an oxymoron; every view is subjective, from a particular angle of vision. We always encounter the biblical text with interests. We always have a stake in our reading of it. We always have angles of vision, which can be helpful or harmful in interpreting texts.<sup>2</sup>

In *The Bible in Human Transformation*, a devastating critique of the way the historical critical study of Scripture was being carried out—a critique that eventuated in his not receiving tenure at Union Theological Seminary—Wink asked two sharply pointed questions:

Is anything but intellectualism possible when our questions do not arise primarily out of the struggle with concrete problems of life and society, from the blistering exposure to trial and error, from the

need for wisdom in the ambiguous mash of events? Can historical criticism, practiced in the academy, ensnared in an objectivist ideology, ever do more than simply refer the data of the text *away from an encounter with experience* and back to its own uncontrolled premises?<sup>3</sup>

It is not hard to understand why, when the time for a tenure vote came, Wink's fellow biblical faculty at Union voted it down. In spite of the cost, throughout his career Wink demonstrated great courage in continuing to stand for objectivity in research while standing against the ideology of objectivism that, in his estimation, stultified the practice of biblical scholarship in the academy. At the same time, he insisted on recognition of the roles "emotions, will, interests, and bias" play in the life—and thus the work—of scholars, while warning against equally stultifying subjectivism.

Wink's concern to integrate experience and reason began in his college years. In an autobiographical piece, "Write What You See" (the title itself points to such integration), Wink traces his journey from a childhood steeped in Methodist perfectionism under the influence of a liberal Methodist pastor in Dallas, Texas to an "atheist phase" during college. In the summer of his sophomore year, Wink went to Oregon to work in a lumber mill. For a month or so he wrestled with the idea of God. Finally, his internal struggle led him to once again affirm the reality of God, but it was belief in a God with no content. In his own words: "I said the word 'God,' and something resonated as true, but I had abandoned my childhood faith and had not arrived at anything else."<sup>4</sup>

Before the summer was over, Wink, at the invitation of another roomer at his boarding house, attended a Pentecostal church where he experienced "the gift of the Holy Spirit." It was a deeply powerful, profound, transformational experience, the reality of which could not be denied.

After his return to college, however, Wink discovered that this not-to-be-gainsaid experience "threatened to split [him] in half, between reason and experience."<sup>5</sup> He could not tolerate the intellectual aridity and theological rigidity of Pentecostal fundamentalism, but neither could he repudiate his religious experience to satisfy his intellect. He found himself, still a student, with a complex but ultimately stimulating task, one that defines the arc of his career: "I was faced with the arduous task of trying to integrate this concussive experience with the rest of my life, and to figure out how to think about it in the context of science, history, politics, psychology, and theology."<sup>6</sup> The interplay between reason and religious experience is a bright thread that runs throughout Wink's corpus.

Another major theme that runs throughout Wink's work, and can be traced to this foundational religious experience, is his defense of the "intention of the text." The disinterested study of the Bible made no sense to Wink. It is a violation of the intention of the text, which is to further personal and social transformation.

His first book (after his doctoral dissertation was published in 1968), was *The Bible in Human Transformation*, published in 1973 (the title points to where he was headed). In this controversial study, Wink stated clearly that correcting "the failure of the old paradigm [of historical critical study of the Bible] to interpret Scripture so as to enable personal and social transformation today" was the task he was setting himself.<sup>7</sup> In his last major book, *The Human Being*, he continued the theme he had first addressed some 30 years earlier: "Historical study, while indispensable, is incapable of providing the kind of insights that can make the Bible come alive with the power to facilitate transformation—which is *the manifest intention* behind its writing and preservation in the first place."<sup>8</sup>

When Wink encountered a text exegetically, he was neither disinterested nor dispassionate. He allowed himself to be examined by the text he examined, questioned by what he was questioning, interrogated by a text that could not ultimately be domesticated. In this, as he saw it, he was yielding himself to the humanizing purposes of God. "No doubt a part of me wants to whittle Jesus down to my size so that I can avoid painful, even costly change. But another part of me is exhilarated by the possibility of becoming more human. *So I listen in order to be transformed.*"<sup>9</sup> Wink's use of the word "listen" with reference to the text is significant. From the beginning to the end of his career, "in the text [he] hope[d] to encounter an alien speech which is finally the self-disclosure of God."<sup>10</sup>

In my opinion, Wink's most important work is *The Human Being* where, in a way never before attempted or accomplished, he provided a masterful interpretation of the biblical son-of-the-man sayings. However, most fans of Wink's work would probably list the Powers trilogy—especially the last volume, *Engaging the Powers*—as his most significant contribution. It has certainly had an international impact and is an invaluable resource for reflecting on the nature of structural/systemic evil and domination systems in the light of biblical categories.

The genesis of the Powers trilogy again illustrates the close relationship between biography and bibliography in Wink's scholarship. As he explains in the preface to the first volume (*Naming the Powers*), Wink, accompanied by his wife June, spent a sabbatical semester in 1982 in Latin America, largely in

Chile. He had gone to experience life under Chile's military dictatorship, to get a firsthand look at the country's horrendous civil rights abuses, and to see how the churches were responding to the "everyday crush of oppression."

It was a traumatic experience; weeks of hearing the stories of the families of the "disappeared," of speaking with those who had been tortured by the government, of witnessing the poverty, hunger, and hopelessness concomitant to dictatorship left its mark on Wink. He became ill and disheartened and angry at both the oppressors and the oppressed. In his own words:

The evils we encountered were so monolithic, so massively supported by our own government, in some cases so anchored in a long history of tyranny, that it scarcely seemed that anything could make a difference.<sup>11</sup>

He had experienced firsthand what he would spend much of his remaining career reflecting upon, researching and writing about—the "principalities and powers" that express the inner spirituality of the domination systems that throughout human history have bedeviled the lives of the many to the advantage of the few. Wink brought the questions—religious/spiritual, political, economic, social, psychological, philosophical—that emerged from his horrific Latin American experience to Scripture, seeking categories of interpretation and understanding that would lead to praxis. His masterful study of "power" in all its expressions in the Scriptures and in contemporary life was the result.

In the first volume of the Powers trilogy, Wink lays the groundwork by identifying all of the biblical terms for "power," exegeting them within their context, and then offering an interpretation of "the Powers" as the inner spiritual aspect of material reality in general, and structures and systems in particular. In so doing, he returns to the church biblical language capable of critically addressing the nuances of power and its expressions in the contemporary world.

In the second volume (*Unmasking the Powers*), Wink looks in depth at seven of the Powers mentioned in Scripture and identified in the first volume. Wink's intention in "unmasking" the Powers is to make visible in the contemporary context realities that materialistic reductionism has banished from view:

. . . 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 capacity to bless us are thwarted, their capacity 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.<sup>12</sup>

Wink has given us language with which to understand and express experiences that a materialistic worldview would rather not talk about.

In the third volume (*Engaging the Powers*), Wink brings the conversation into the contemporary world with a profound discussion of the role of violence in general, and the “myth of redemptive violence” in particular, in modern life. In previous volumes he had argued persuasively that the Powers were the “hidden interiority” or spiritual aspect of material reality. In this volume he examines their more visible institutionalized, structural, systemic forms. However, as the title suggests, he does it with an eye toward praxis, toward engagement that aggressively but nonviolently resists the structures of domination.

His sabbatical experience in Chile had led Wink to believe that nonviolent but aggressive resistance was the only way to resist and overcome the institutionalized, systemic evil that he had witnessed firsthand. In 1986, this conviction took him to South Africa on sabbatical leave; the result was a small but immensely influential book titled *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa*. This little book was later reworked both into a chapter in *Engaging the Powers* and into a standalone volume (*Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*, 2003). During a subsequent—and unauthorized—visit to South Africa in 1988, Wink moved about doing workshops on peace and nonviolence until he was expelled by the South African government. Once again we see the foundational place of experience in Wink’s scholarship and his ongoing concern for personal and social transformation through encounters with texts that interrogate and challenge.

This book contains a sampling of Walter Wink’s work published by Fortress Press. Like the tantalizing variety of chocolates in a Whitman’s Sampler, these selections from Wink’s corpus are meant to whet your appetite for more. At the end of this volume you will find a complete bibliography of Wink’s books. For a complete bibliography of articles, essays and chapters written by Wink, I refer you to *Enigmas and Powers: Engaging the Work of Walter Wink in Classroom, Church, and World*, ed. D. Sieple and Frederick W. Wieddmann (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008). This excellent book, written by friends and colleagues of Dr. Wink on the occasion of his retirement in 2005

from Auburn Theological Seminary in New York, offers cross-disciplinary insights into and appreciation for his body of work and his life. As always, and as it should be, Walter Wink combined bibliography and biography in a powerful way.

## Notes

1. Walter Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 5.
2. Walter Wink, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 7.
3. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, 5 (emphasis added).
4. Walter Wink, "Write What You See," *The Fourth R*, 1994 (<http://www.westarinstitute.org/resources/the-fourth-r/write-what-you-see/>).
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, 47.
8. Wink, *The Human Being*, 12 (emphasis added).
9. Ibid., 16 (emphasis added).
10. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, 56.
11. Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), ix.
12. Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 7.