

Enigmas and Powers

*Engaging the Work of Walter Wink
for Classroom, Church, and World*

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6

**Walter Wink
as Philosopher**

D. Seiple

THE RENOWNED OLD TESTAMENT SCHOLAR BERNHARD ANDERSON reports to us that the ancient rabbis, disturbed over the account of Ezekiel's vision and the strange doctrines that might result from too wide a hearing of it, forbade the public reading of Ezekiel's opening chapter, and even stipulated that no persons under thirty years of age should read the book privately.¹ Times have obviously changed. I first met Walter Wink down at the Open Center in Soho, talking about his newly published book *The Human Being*,² which seeks to make the kind of sense out of Ezekiel's opening chapter that we all can understand. At the time, I did not understand where that encounter would take me, nor how much it would change my thinking on matters that, frankly, I thought I knew a great deal about already. I learned that I did not know nearly as much as I thought.

My appointed task here today is to offer some modest philosophical observations on Walter Wink's work. But even to mention the words "modesty" and "philosophy" in the same breath might strike some as rather odd, because philosophy has not typically been very modest. One could be more modest, after all, than to purport to offer rational insight into the very nature of reality—which is what philosophers have often been wont to do. Now Walter Wink is an exceedingly modest man, and I'm not sure he'd be comfortable being called a philosopher of that sort. But nevertheless, Walter does speak consistently, forcefully, and by

1. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament*, 433.

2. Seiple, "Review of Walter Wink, *The Human Being*."

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now famously about what he calls the “Powers that Be,” which seem to be reigning, currently but temporarily, in our very fallen world. Only a person who has a vivid enough sense of the real nature of things—a philosophical aspiration, after all—would be in a position to really say much about those principalities and powers.

So Walter’s project is, among other things, philosophical. But I imagine that he suspects what many of us philosophers sometimes forget, which is that philosophy is an inherently limited discipline, with inevitable fissures and tensions and even inconsistencies, which are internal to any worthwhile philosophical system or project. These are left to other philosophers to identify. Since my assignment here is to speak the philosopher’s voice, I shall attempt to do just that—to uncover a logical tension in Walter’s writing which I think points to a profound philosophical issue. It might even be the most profound philosophical issue of our time.

I perform this gentle task, much sobered after having once again spent much time these past weeks reconsidering what Walter has said, and along the way, I’ve had a humbling and startling realization. I’ve had to ask myself: what in the world have I been doing reading philosophy *instead* of reading this? This is good stuff—tension, fissures, and all. I can’t speak about Walter’s influence on the *profession* of philosophy nearly as well as I can about his influence on my own thinking *in* philosophy.

So let me begin by recalling that Walter has made a virtual career of contesting dominant paradigms, but he does not (like a few in the field these days) contest the general paradigm of Christian faith itself, and he is not about to abandon the faithful notion that a real and holy power is at work in our spiritual life. This points to one pervasive philosophical theme for him—that there are two sides of power, as Michel Foucault himself would put it. First, we find arrayed all around us the “invisible dimension” of disciplinary social forces—whose very naming reveals the vivid and often terrible impact they have upon us.³ These principalities and powers, Walter declares, can truly be “named” as actual spirits. This is not merely metaphor! Walter calls them “real though unsubstantial” forces “having no existence apart from their concretions in the world of

things,”⁴ and anyone who doubts that Walter is a philosopher should commit that quote to memory! These forces are not to be reified, but, as Aristotle might say of Plato’s realities, neither are they to be reduced and razored away.

So—on the one hand, we have the Powers That Be. On the other hand, Walter rather bravely posits what some postmodernists disparagingly call a “binary distinction.” For in addition to the principalities and powers we all normally experience, Walter also distinguishes an essentially different power—of non-violent love—and love for Walter is metaphysically transforming. Here is Jesus’ “third way” between passivity and violence.⁵ In an age of very welcome interfaith dialogue and increasingly prolific “post-Christian” references, and in a world going quickly to hell in a terrorist’s handbasket, Walter proclaims the Christian gospel as “the most powerful antidote. . . that the world has ever known.”⁶ “And the same God who calls us to nonviolence gives us the power to carry it out.”⁷

In this, Walter Wink has been steadfast over the years. He has stoutly resisted attempts to explain away or deconstruct this Other and Holy Power. His devastating critique of Morton Smith’s “magician” theory of Jesus ministry,⁸ which demolished that cantankerous thesis plank by shaky plank, culminated in unmasking Smith’s real agenda—namely, a “systematic effort to undermine the very ground on which Christian faith exists.”⁹ Smith’s agenda was not a welcome proposal, from Walter’s point of view—not then, back in 1978, and true to form, on *this* point at least, Walter has not changed his mind since.

The irony of Smith’s work, Walter suggested back then, was that its real consequence might be not the debunking of Christianity, but the recovery of its shamanistic, miraculous, and healing power—in “a new synthesis of spirit and nature.”¹⁰ In retrospect, it would certainly be stretching things to say that Morton Smith has really done that. It

3. Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 3.

4. Wink, *Naming the Powers*, 4.

5. Wink, “Neither Passivity Nor Violence,” 210–24.

6. Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 62.

7. *Ibid.*, 135.

8. Smith, *Jesus the Magician*.

9. Wink, “Jesus as Magician,” 11.

10. *Ibid.*, 14.

would be much less of a stretch to reflect upon the ways that Walter Wink has done that.

This project of synthesizing “spirit” and “nature” is a thoroughly philosophical project. Can it be done? Well, it hasn’t been easy. When Walter began that project, it was not at all clear (to some) that he wasn’t being as much of a curmudgeon as the Morton Smiths of his profession. The very first sentence of his groundbreaking little book on biblical criticism—*The Bible in Human Transformation* (1973), written for his colleagues at Union and elsewhere—was the startling announcement that “historical biblical criticism is bankrupt.”¹¹ Now this seems hardly well-designed to win friends and influence the very people who have made careers in that field, and indeed Walter did not stay too long at Union Theological Seminary. But, as in so much else, Walter had the last laugh on that, and Union’s loss was Auburn’s gain—made all the more palatable by the fact that yea these many years he has been gracing the halls of both seminaries. Fortunately, this has meant that he’s been a very present and available resource to scholars and students at Union, who have been impressed by the fact that so many of Walter’s younger colleagues in the biblical field began believing that what he was saying, back in 1973, might actually be true!

True in what sense, though? There’s a philosophical question! And here’s where the tension shows up. Here is where the story gets rather complex. Here is the point of logical tension. (1) For on the one hand, Walter wants to explain the spirituality of being human in terms of philosophical anthropology—which is the Christian liberal’s view about where to start doing theology (namely, with the experience of being human). As Schleiermacher,¹² and even Calvin himself insisted,¹³ we know God through God’s relation to the world we experience, and so it is at least arguable (though in Calvin’s case, ambiguously so¹⁴) that philosophical anthropology is the natural place for scholars to look. And so Walter, in his typically provocative style, takes the heretical Ludwig

Feuerbach as his model, at one point, declaring that “we can relate to God as human beings because God is truly ‘Human.’”¹⁵

This makes Walter an unabashed liberal humanist. And though it’s a crucial detail that slips past the befogged polemics of right-wing apologetics, the fact is that not all humanists are reductively secular humanists, and Walter’s project has been to make clear just how this can be so.

(2) So on the one hand, we have Walter’s humanistic liberalism. On the other hand, though—and here’s where the puzzling and complex tension enters the picture—Walter is skeptical of the disinterested, “objectivist” categories that were traditionally used to buttress liberal theological explanation. This is just what led him to offer a “new paradigm for biblical study” back in 1973—the idea that there are “unconscious ideological elements”¹⁶ that affect the selection and interpretation of data, in the biblical field just as in any other field of study. This is so obvious nowadays that we can hardly imagine ourselves back in the old historical-critical mindset, and Walter, once again the provocateur, declares that this very notion of an “‘objective view’ is itself an oxymoron; every view is subjective, from a particular angle of vision.”¹⁷ Walter does not want to call himself an objectivist.

And here’s the problem! For it appears to leave Walter (and us with him) in a troublesome quandary, I think, because Walter’s whole project *presupposes* a framework of objectivity. The Hebrew account of the exodus, Ezekiel’s vision of God’s throne, the social conscience of the minor prophets—all these indicate that, in Walter’s view at least, something *objective* happened in the formation of the Old Testament: Other myths had been written entirely from the standpoint of the oppressors; but for the first time in human history, God begins to be seen as identified with the victims of violence.¹⁸ (We see here the trace of what postmodernists disapprovingly call a “metanarrative.”) And recently Walter has proclaimed once again that “something ‘objective’ did happen to God, to Jesus, and to the disciples” which was a fact about historical con-

11. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, 1.

12. Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, §50.

13. Calvin, *Institutes*, I, iii, 1.

14. *Ibid.*, I, iv.

15. Wink, *The Human Being*, 42.

16. Wink, *The Bible in Human Transformation*, 12.

17. Wink, *The Human Being*, 7.

18. Wink, *The Powers That Be*, 84–85.

sciousness and “not just an assertion of faith.”¹⁹ Not just, in other words, subjective. Were this not so, there would be no real power in Jesus’ third way. Power is itself an objective category.

So what’s to be done about this? That’s what I’ve been trying to figure out. And in fact I’m not at all convinced that Walter’s project is *deeply* inconsistent at this point—I suspect that the inconsistency is only at the rhetorical level. But even the appearance of inconsistency just sticks in the gut of any philosopher—which is one reason I’ve been reading this stuff so frenetically. There is more work to be done—a fact that keeps us scholars happily busy.

But I think that Walter calls upon us not to miss the forest for the footnotes. There is much more than a scholarly challenge for us here. Even scholars, after all, live in the real world of The Powers That Be. And in such a world—in the face of the suprahuman disciplinary Powers arrayed against us—Walter reminds us that the activity of prayer and of spiritual discernment is indispensable, because unless we win the battle on the interior spiritual battlefield, before external battles are joined, we will become like the very ones we fight. Evil will have made us over into its likeness. And in that case, we won’t even know we’ve lost. We’ll think we’ve actually won. Therein lies much of the sad part of the Christian legacy. And in his warnings against this, we are blessed to have the happy legacy of Walter Wink.

19. Wink, *The Human Being*, 152–53.

7

Walter Wink and Peace Theology

Ted Grimsrud

A FEW YEARS AGO, I HEARD THE FOLKSINGER RICHIE HAVENS IN concert. Prior to one of his songs, he said that he wished he didn’t feel he had to perform one particular song—not because it wasn’t a good song, but because he wishes we could come to a point where it would no longer be relevant. But we have not made it to that point yet. So he proceeded with a passionate rendering of that anti-war song, “Lives in the Balance.”

Maybe we could say the same thing about Walter Wink’s theological analysis of nonviolence, and especially what he calls “the myth of redemptive violence.” It would be nice to say that our world had changed so much since *Engaging the Powers* came out in 1992 that the book’s powerful articulation of peace theology had lost much of its relevance. Were it only so.

If anything, Walter’s work on peace versus violence is more relevant than when he first articulated it. I say this with gratitude for the brilliance and farsightedness of this work, but also with great sorrow that our society and the broader world have, if anything, become even more in thrall to the powers of domination. However, if the need continues, we may be grateful that we have Walter’s work—just as Richie Havens expressed gratitude for Jackson Brown’s “Lives in the Balance.”

The term “peace theology” has been used in recent years for theological reflection that places at the center of its concern a vision for opposition to warfare and other forms of violence, and for alternative strategies of conflict resolution and resistance communities, to counter