

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life



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Which worldview do you choose?

“A worldview,” says theologian Walter Wink in *The Powers That Be*,* “provides a picture of the nature of things.” It covers such subjects as “where is heaven, where is earth, what is visible and invisible, what is real and unreal.” Wink calls worldviews “the bare-bones structures with which we think.”



What’s especially intriguing and a bit scary about worldviews is that we all have one but we may not even realize it exists. Wink points out that it usually



operates on a level below our consciousness. And although worldviews dictate the way in which whole societies see the world, he finds, there’s remarkably little discussion of them.

Our worldviews heavily influence how we understand the Bible’s contents and how we express our religious beliefs. In fact, as Wink puts it, worldviews “determine what we are allowed to believe about the world.” To me that means becoming aware of them is extremely important.

“There has been only a handful of worldviews in all of Western history,” Wink finds. Let’s look at what he says they are.



■ The Ancient Worldview

The Bible reflects this worldview. In it, Wink explains, “everything earthly has its heavenly counterpart, and everything heavenly has its earthly counterpart. Every event is thus a combination of



both dimensions of reality.” For example, if war starts on earth, a war also is happening in heaven, between the angels of the nations. Similarly, events that start in heaven are mirrored on earth.

“The powers” today



Some of Paul’s letters, in the New Testament, refer to what is translated in the King James Version as “the principalities and powers.” Walter Wink has

tried to figure out what that means in today’s language and today’s understanding.

For by [God] were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers ...

—Colossians 1:16 KJV

“The powers,” Wink finds, are the spirituality at the center of political, economic, and cultural institutions. “The powers,” Wink believes, “are simulta-

neously an outer, visible structure and an inner, spiritual reality.” We usually perceive their spiritual dimension only indirectly, by projecting it onto human beings or onto mental pictures of spiritual beings such as angels and demons—pictures that came from an ancient worldview.

Our task, says Wink, is to recognize that the real spiritual forces we experience come from actual institutions. The issue for us, Wink believes, isn’t whether

God ... created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities [KJV “principalities and powers”] in the heavenly places.

—Ephesians 3:10

we “believe in” these powers but whether we can learn to identify them when we encounter them embodied in cultures, regimes, corporations, dictators, and other people and groups. The apostle Paul called that process “discerning spirits,” Wink reminds us.

When a Power gives its own interests higher priority than God’s, Wink says, it becomes demonic. And

according to Paul, making God’s will known to the Powers is the church’s calling. Thus when one of the Powers goes astray, we who are the church are responsible for using our God-given power to work actively for the transformation of the Power that has strayed.



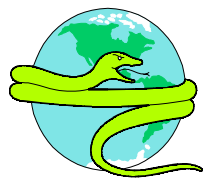
“This is a symbolic way of saying,” Wink explains, “that every material reality has a spiritual dimension, and every spiritual reality has physical consequences. There can be no event or entity that does not consist, simultaneously, of the visible and the invisible.”

Walter Wink reminds us that most people in the ancient world shared this worldview. It was held by the Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Babylonians, Indians, and Chinese, in addition to the writers of the Bible, so there is nothing uniquely biblical about this worldview. “That means,” Wink believes, “that there is no reason that the Bible cannot be interpreted within the framework of other worldviews as well.”



■ The Spiritualist Worldview

This worldview emerged in the second century of the Christian era, observes Wink, and radically challenged the Judeo-Christian notion that the creation is basically good.



In the Spiritualist way of seeing the world, spirit is good and matter is evil. The world is in effect “a prison into which spirits have fallen from the good heaven.”

This worldview, says Wink, sees deformed and ignorant powers ruling the material world, and it considers sex, the body, and earthly life in general as evil. In this worldview, therefore, each person’s religious task is to rescue her or his spirit from these earthly powers and get back to the spiritual realm.

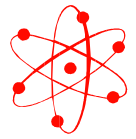
This worldview, Wink reminds us, is associated with religions such as Gnosticism. However, “it continues to be a powerful factor today in spiritualism, sexual hang-ups, eating disorders, negative self-images, and the rejection of one’s body.” It is also reflected, however, he assures us, “in those forms of Christian faith that place all the emphasis on getting to heaven when one leaves this ‘vale of tears.’”



■ The Materialist Worldview

This one became prominent during the Enlightenment, but Wink finds that it existed even before Jesus’s time on earth. Essentially the opposite of

spiritualism, this worldview says that nothing really exists except what can be known through the five senses and reason. Holders of this worldview thus believe there’s no heaven, no spiritual world, no God, and no soul. Also human beings are nothing but matter, the universe has no intrinsic meaning, and there’s “no right and wrong except what society agrees upon for purposes of survival or tranquility.”



Wink finds this worldview to be the dominant ethos of most universities, the media, and culture as a whole. He says it “has in fact become so pervasive in modern society that it is virtually identified with the scientific point of view, even though the new physics has moved beyond materialism into a reenchanting universe.”

■ The Theological Worldview

This reaction to materialism assumes that a supernatural realm exists but that it can’t be known by the senses, so its existence can’t be confirmed or denied. This worldview therefore splits reality in two, conceding earthly reality to science and sealing off theology and science from each other.

As an example of the theological worldview, Wink tells about a friend who was a doctoral student in geology. “As a religious fundamentalist,” says Wink, “he believed on Sundays that the universe was created in 4004 B.C., but during the rest of the week he accepted the theory that it was created around fifteen billion years ago.”



Stated like this, the fallacy of this worldview is obvious, but according to Wink, this student’s way of looking at reality “is only a flagrant form of the split accepted by virtually all the great theologians of the twentieth century.” Even though they have lived in a world inundated with scientific data and discoveries, they haven’t bothered to argue with science, Wink finds. They simply haven’t been interested in it. I often see this worldview held by Christian physicians who use science’s most



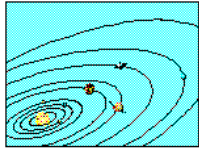
recent discoveries constantly in their work but ignore science’s findings when they read the Bible.

“The price paid for this schizoid view of reality,” says Walter Wink, “was the loss of a sense of the

whole and the unity of heavenly and earthly aspects of existence.” This worldview claims to separate two things that can’t be separated—science and religion.

■ **An Integral Worldview**

“This view of reality,” says Wink, “sees everything as having an outer and an inner aspect.” It affirms spirit at the core of every created thing, but it also sees the inner reality as “inextricably related to an outer form or physical manifestation.”



“This new worldview,” Wink explains, “takes seriously all the aspects of the ancient worldview but combines them in a different way.” Both worldviews, for example, use spatial imagery. However, instead

of expressing transcendence by talking about heaven as “up,” the integral worldview refers to “within.” It acknowledges that because everything in the universe turns, there isn’t really an “up” anywhere.

The integral worldview, as Wink describes it, acknowledges that “soul permeates the universe”—that “the universe is suffused with the divine.” This isn’t pantheism, however, which claims everything is God. Instead, it is panentheism, the understanding that everything is *in* God and God is *in* everything—that, as Wink puts it, “spirit is at the heart of everything, and all creatures are potential revealers of God.” Wink believes that this worldview “makes the biblical data more intelligible for people today than any other available worldview, the ancient one included.”



Wink finds the integral worldview emerging from several different streams of thought. Among those he mentions are the new physics, liberation theol-

ogy, feminist theology, many Native American religions, and the writings of psychologist Carl Jung, paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, process philosophers, some Buddhists, and theologians Morton Kelsey and Matthew Fox.



We have chunks of all of them

“Most of us,” Wink sees, “have chunks of each of these worldviews in our psyches.” What he finds most important about this is that “*we may be the first generation in the history of the world that can make a conscious choice between these worldviews*” (his italics). In Wink’s opinion, “we can decide which worldview best describes the world as we encounter it, and whether we still want to be controlled by the others.”



Until I read Wink’s description of these worldviews I hadn’t considered them in as explicit a form as he presents. However, reading his book made me realize that in a fuzzier way I’d actually been considering them for a long time. I also saw that although I use chunks of other worldviews for thinking about certain subjects, my main conscious choice is what Wink calls the integral worldview.



Which do you choose?

For many years I was a very active but robot-like churchgoer and an unquestioning conformist in most other areas of life too. Several years ago, however, I started seriously thinking about what the Bible’s contents really meant and what the church’s purpose really was. My search for answers led me to a lot of books and authors that were new to me. They helped

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me make sense of a lot of things in the Bible and religious tradition that had never made sense to me before, and I came to feel very clearly that God was leading me in this search.

Prominent among those authors were some of those Wink mentions in describing the emergence of the integral worldview—Teilhard de Chardin, Jung, and Kelsey. I also discovered eye-opening, life-changing writings in Christian feminist and other Christian liberation theologies during that God-led search. So Wink's descriptions of worldviews and of what "the powers" seem likely to mean in today's

terms have made his books especially welcome and helpful finds for me. He uses the language of the integral worldview which I tend to find most helpful for considering, understanding, and expressing the Christian faith.

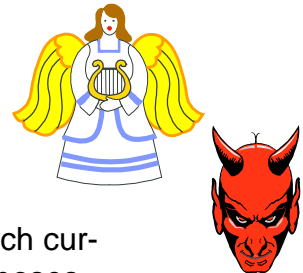
Whether you read Wink's description of worldviews in his writings or only here in my brief summary, I hope you'll think seriously about which worldview most accurately describes reality. Which one do you choose?

Barbara

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**Angels, demons, Satan—
inadequate language for something that's real and important**

Theologian Walter Wink wonders about today's interest in angels, demons, Satan, and other such beings. "It is as if modern people, stripped of life's spiritual depths by a shallow materialist culture," he finds, "are crying out for transcendence." He points out, however, that much current talk about angels and demons is as shallow as the materialism it opposes.



Wink observes that people use this old way of naming spiritual realities because they lack a better way to say what they mean. In Wink's view they are groping for a more adequate language than tradition provides for talking about spiritual realities. He believes that by choosing what he calls an integral worldview instead of the ancient worldview we can learn to recognize the spirituality that is embodied all around us. And when it's evil we can see how to use Christ's power to defeat it.