

Political Theology and Nonviolence: Three Significant North American Contributors

By Ched Myers

Note: *Twenty years ago I argued that the Cross of the nonviolent Jesus, who lived and died resisting empire and renewing Israel's alternative social vision, represented a "stumbling block" for many political theologies (see Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus, Orbis, 1988/2008, pp 469ff). Recently I was invited to reflect on three North American Christians who have shaped nonviolent thought and practice for the Eerdmans Reader in Contemporary Political Theology (edited by William Cavanaugh and Craig Hovey). Below is an edited version of that contribution; the volume is due out next year from Eerdmans.*

Theories and practices of revolutionary nonviolence have too often been overlooked or marginalized by liberation and post colonial theologies. This brief reflection looks at three North American Christians who have contributed significantly to the development of the theology and discipleship of nonviolent social change. **Dorothy Day (1897-1980)** lived among the urban poor in New York's Bowery neighborhood, founding the Catholic Worker movement during the Great Depression. **Rene Girard** is a French social philosopher and literary critic whose formidable work has been influential, yet has earned only a small (if loyal) following among academic theologians. New Testament scholar **Walter Wink** did much of his work from Auburn's "seminary without borders" in New York, and in recent years has concentrated his efforts on popular education in churches and peace organizations in the U.S. and South Africa. Each of these three has been instrumental in developing and promoting engaged Christian nonviolence.

Walter Wink's little book *The Bible in Human Transformation* (1973) challenged the gulf between academic inquiry and personal spirituality in biblical studies, and launched his quest to understand the relevance of scripture to the work of personal and political change. Wink (*right*) is best known for his influential "Powers" trilogy:

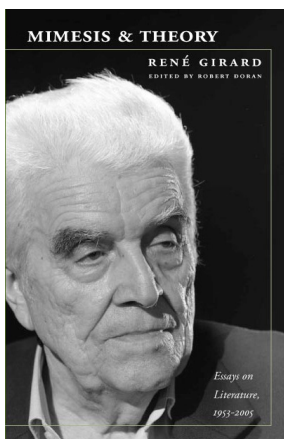
- *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the N.T.* (1984) summarized and extended the efforts of theologians such as G.B. Caird, John H. Yoder and William Stringfellow to rehabilitate the importance of principalities and powers language in the N.T.
- *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (1986) attempted to decode the N.T. cosmology (or worldview) using the insights of depth psychology and what one reviewer called a



“phenomenology of oppression,” showing its relevance for contemporary religion and politics.

- *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (1992) articulated three of Wink’s most important contributions: the “myth of redemptive violence” that legitimates conventional thinking concerning retributive justice and just war; the “Domination system” as shorthand for the whole complex of personal and political delusion and oppression; and the gospel centrality of nonviolence. This volume was influenced by Wink’s hand-on experiences in a context of revolutionary struggle (articulated in his *Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa: Jesus Third Way*, 1987).

Wink’s work has helped animate a renaissance in Christian nonviolent activism in the First World. While he occasionally suffers from “new paradigm” optimism, Wink’s translation of N.T. semantics that have so long been captive to modern spiritualism represents an enormous contribution to political theology. I share his deep conviction that central to the church’s vocation in the world is the militantly evangelical and political task of “making known the wisdom of God to the rulers and authorities in the highest places” (Eph 3:10).



Rene Girard’s interdisciplinary thought ranges wide and deep, with a particular focus on the origins of violence in human culture. Girard (b. 1923 in France) studied history in Paris before doing his doctoral work in the U.S. He taught literature and criticism at several American universities before coming to Stanford in 1981, from where he retired in 1995. His most theologically important works are *Violence and the Sacred* (1972), *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World* (1987), and *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (2001). Girard formulated an anthropological theory of “mimetic desire” to explain how human individuals and groups build solidarity through the scapegoating of a common enemy.

A Roman Catholic, Girard argued that all violence has its roots in rituals or myths of scapegoating, but that the biblical narrative in general and Christ’s death in particular exposed this lie and overturned the sovereignty of sacrificial religion. As Brian McDonald points out, “Girard’s belief about the death of Christ may be no less controversial among Christians than his allegiance to Christ is scandalous to the secular world.” Girard’s work has stimulated fresh theological thinking around nonviolence (see e.g. W. Swartley, ed., *Violence Renounced: Rene Girard, Biblical Studies and Peacemaking*, Pandora Press, 2000); non-propitiatory understandings of the Cross (e.g. J. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Eerdmans, 2001); and has even inspired two websites that offer Girardian

resources to those preaching the Lectionary (<http://girardianlectionary.net> and www.preachingpeace.org).

Dorothy Day's work spanned a half-century of American religious activism. As a young journalist Day was deeply influenced by the resurgence of radical social thought in the wake of World War I, particularly socialism and anarchism. Living in New York, she was active in radical politics, but converted to Catholicism in the late 1920s. She founded the Catholic Worker movement with French anarchist Peter Maurin in 1933 at the depth of the Depression. Based on a philosophy of serving Christ by offering hospitality to the poor, resisting State violence and nurturing "clarification of thought," the Catholic Worker movement has (without central decisionmaking or institutionalization) grown to some 185 communities around North American and abroad (see www.catholicworker.org). Just as importantly, Catholic Worker thought and practice have disproportionately influenced several generations of Christian activists, from antiwar actions in the 1960s to Central American solidarity and Sanctuary organizing in the 1980s to young anarcho-primitivist communities today.

Day (*right during a protest in support of farmworkers*) was author of several books, most notably her autobiography *The Long Loneliness* (1952) and her story of the Catholic Worker movement, *Loaves and Fishes* (1963). But her main expression was in the pages of *The Catholic Worker* monthly paper, where she railed against both U.S. militarism and American Catholic conformity to Cold War anti-communist culture. Her polemics were backed up by street-level activism. Their pacifist stance brought Catholic Workers notoriety in the late 1950s, when they publicly refused to cooperate with air raid drills in New York City that were "preparing" the citizenry for nuclear war. Similarly, Workers were among the first to burn draft cards in the Vietnam era—the embodiment of Day's call for "wholesale disloyalty to Americanism, wholesale refusal to fight." Such radical, gospel-rooted nonviolence cut sharply against the grain of mid-century Catholicism, yet helped birth the creative experiments in symbolic nonviolent direct action of the Berrigan brothers and the subsequent Plowshares disarmament movement. Dorothy Day's legacy has measurably pushed American Catholics on questions of war and poverty, while her witness as a lay woman continues to inspire faith-based activists of all stripes.



Wink, Girard and Day each understand the Cross to lie at the center of both Christian theology *and* politics —not as a blood sacrifice to propitiate an angry deity, but as the ultimate form of resistance to the logic of retributive "justice." For Girard, Christ's death spells the cosmic demise of scapegoating politics and

religion. Wink argues that Jesus' way of nonviolence subverts the Powers by refusing to recognize their sovereignty over life and death. And Day understood her pacifism, rooted in solidarity with the least, to be constitutive of Christian discipleship. Elaine Enns and I have tried to integrate these trajectories to keep building the case for a biblical theology of nonviolence in *Ambassadors of Reconciliation, Vol. I: New Testament Reflections on Restorative Justice and Peacemaking* (Orbis, 2009).

Wink and Girard provide theological and anthropological grounding for nonviolence as a way of life that political theology needs to take more seriously. Their approach accords well with recent studies analyzing the socio-political context of the Bible, and its testimony of resistance to empire (e.g. R. Horsley, ed., *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, Westminster/John Knox, 2008). The witness of Dorothy Day, meanwhile, challenges political theology to translate its insights concretely into daily practice. While the issue of "social location" has only recently been embraced by theologians, its importance has long been understood by the Catholic Worker movement. One can only assess the truth of what Dorothy famously called the "filthy rotten system" from the perspective of the poorest—yet our seminaries are well insulated from such contexts.

Political theology must be about *where*, *how* and with *whom* we do our reflection. Dorothy Day practiced what we might call "somatic politics": on one hand tending to the bodies of the broken as a way of communing with the Body of Christ; on the other hand placing her own body in public space in a way that nonviolently "confronted the Powers." This dialectic between the works of mercy and prophetic dissent has its roots, of course, in the Jesus story itself. But it also illustrates a first principle of Gandhian nonviolence: our mobilized, empowered but disarmed bodies are our most powerful political tool. To summarize the perspective of these three disciples, in order for theology to be *political*, it must engage the Powers. But for politics to be *theological*, it must aspire to nonviolence.

For further reading:

