

Introduction

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Introduction to Part VI:
Confronting the Powers.
In *Essays Reader in
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C. Hoey, *Essays*, pp. 337-
341.

To argue that theology should be fundamentally grounded in context, content, and method begs the question of what *kind* of concrete political practices are being assumed or advocated. About this there has been considerable vagueness or equivocation, perhaps because of the academic social location from which most North Atlantic political theology, Third-World liberation theology, and post-colonial theology has been generated. This section addresses the issue head on: Christian political engagement should be *militant* but *nonviolent* in its efforts to resist structural injustice and to build a more humane world.

It is hardly accidental that our three selections come from the margins of or outside altogether, the theological academy. Dorothy Day (1897-1980) located her life and witness among the urban poor in New York's Bowery neighborhood, founding the influential Catholic Worker movement during the Great Depression. René Girard is a French social philosopher and literary critic whose formidable work has been widely influential, yet has earned only a relatively small (though loyal) following among theologians. New Testament scholar Walter Wink did much of his work from the non-degree-granting "seminary without borders" at Auburn in New York, and in recent years has concentrated his efforts on popular education in churches and social change organizations in the U.S. and South Africa. Each of the three has made a significant contribution to the development of the theory and practice of Christian active nonviolence, and thus to political theology.

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 struggled with failed relationships. Converting to Catholicism in the late 1920s, she founded the Catholic Worker movement with French anarchist Peter Maurin in 1933, in the depths 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 decision-making or institutionalization) grown to some 185 communities around North America 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 was the 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 and the selection below from a 1948 edition in vintage. As was typical of her style, Day 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, in this case, leafleting against universal conscription at local colleges.

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 to 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.

René 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 scapegoating a common enemy (explained simply by Brian McDonald in the introduction to his interview with Girard, below).

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 McDonald points out below, “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;¹ non-prophetary understandings of the Cross;² and has even inspired two websites that offer Girardian resources to those preaching the Lectionary (<http://girardianlectionary.net> and www.preachingpeace.org).

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. His best-known work is the “Powers” trilogy:

- *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (1984) summarized and extended the efforts of, for example, G. B. Caird, H. Berkhof, John Howard Yoder, and William Stringfellow to rehabilitate the importance of principalities and powers language in the New Testament.
- *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (1986) attempted to decode the New Testament 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; his thesis is neatly summarized and popularized in the selection below.
- *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 think-

1. See, e.g., W. Swartley, ed., *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies and Peacemaking* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000).

2. E.g., J. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

ing concerning retributive justice and just war; the “Domination system” as shorthand for the whole complex of personal and political delusion and oppression (also summarized in the selection below); and the gospel centrality of nonviolence. This volume was influenced by Wink’s hands-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 to animate a renaissance in Christian nonviolent activism, at least in the First World. While he occasionally suffers from “new paradigm” optimism, Wink’s “translation” of New Testament semantics, which 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).

Twenty years ago I argued that the nonviolent cross of Jesus, who lived and died resisting empire and renewing Israel’s alternative social vision, represented a “stumbling block” for political theologues.³ Indeed, the theory and practices of revolutionary nonviolence have too often been overlooked or marginalized by those seeking a politically engaged faith, including most of the voices represented in this volume. The logic of what Wink calls “re-demprive violence” dies hard, not least in contexts of oppression. On the other hand, too often theological advocates of nonviolence have done so from a safe academic distance, failing to embody Gandhi’s dictum that the truth is revealed only in the *midst* of actual conflicts.

Wink, Girard, and Day (along with a few others in this volume such as Yoder, Tutu, and Hauerwas), in contrast, understand the cross, not as a blood sacrifice to propitiate an angry deity, but as the ultimate form of resistance to the logic of retributive “justice” — to lie at the center of both Christian theology *and* politics. For Girard, Christ’s death spells the cosmic demise of scapegoating politics and religion. For Wink, Jesus’ way of nonviolence subverts the Powers by refusing to recognize their sovereignty over life and death. And for Day, pacifism rooted in solidarity with the least is constitutive of Christian discipleship.

Wink and Girard provide theological and anthropological grounding for nonviolence as a way of life that political theology needs to take more se-

riously. Their approach accords well with recent studies analyzing the socio-political context of the Bible and its testimony of resistance to empire.⁴ Elaine Enns and I have tried to integrate these trajectories to extend the case for a biblical theology of nonviolence in *Ambassadors of Reconciliation*, vol. 1: *New Testament Reflections on Restorative Justice and Peacemaking*.⁵

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 truly assess the truth of what Day 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 the 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.

For theology to be political, the following selections agree, it must engage the Powers; but for politics to be theological, it must aspire to nonviolence.

3. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark’s Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988/2008), pp. 469ff.

4. E.g., R. Horsley, ed., *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2008).

5. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2009.