

Walter Wink, our best teacher of Christian nonviolence

John Dear | May. 29, 2012 On the Road to Peace

"Whoever obeys and teaches these commandments will be called the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 5:19) That's what Jesus announced in the Sermon on the Mount, right after the beatitudes and just before the six antitheses, which instruct us to resist evil nonviolently and to love our enemies. In light of that verse, Walter Wink must be considered one of the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. I can think of no higher praise.

Walter died peacefully May 10 in his home in Sandisfield, Mass., at age 76, with his beloved wife, June, by his side. I first met Walter 20 years ago, but I'd been studying his books for years before that. He helped me at the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and in recent years, we had lunch together each year in Santa Fe with our friends Sheila and Dennis Linn when they attended the annual conference of scientists and philosophers.

[Walter Wink](#) [1], to my mind, was one of the greatest teachers of the Sermon on the Mount and Gospel nonviolence in Christian history. Raised in Dallas, Walter received his master's degree and doctorate in theology from New York's Union Theological Seminary, where he later taught. From 1967 to 1976, he served on the national steering committee of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. Later, he taught at Auburn Theological Seminary in New York. Over the years, he and June gave countless workshops on Jesus and nonviolence around the country and the world.

He's best known for his ground-breaking books on scripture, peace and nonviolence. His series on "the principalities and powers"-- *Naming the Powers: the Language of Power in the New Testament*; *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence*; and *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* -- has influenced thousands of scholars and activists. He also wrote *Jesus' Third Way: Violence and Nonviolence in South Africa*; *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of Man*; *When the Powers Fall: Reconciliation and the Healing of Nations*; *The Powers That Be*; *Transforming Bible Study*; and *Homosexuality and the Bible*.

In 1998, Richard Deats and I asked him to edit a selection of the best writings of *Fellowship* magazine, which since 1915 featured essays by Gandhi, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., Oscar Romero and others. The book, *Peace Is the Way: Writings on Nonviolence from the Fellowship of Reconciliation*, which Walter edited, captures a century of wisdom on nonviolence and is still available from Orbis Books.

After his first visit to South Africa in the early 1980s, according to Richard, Walter wrote a stunning little book about how Christians can use nonviolent resistance to confront and defeat apartheid. The Fellowship of Reconciliation published it as *Jesus' Third Way*, and with the help of several New England churches, hand-addressed and mailed the book to more than 2,800 English-speaking clergy and church workers in South Africa. This book and Walter's secret follow-up visit to South Africa had a profound impact on the South African churches and their nonviolent resistance to apartheid.

Much of his groundbreaking work on Jesus and nonviolence sprang from that South African book. In 2003, Fortress Press published a succinct version of his insights in *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way*. But his definitive, seminal work, in my opinion, is his 1992 classic, *Engaging the Powers*. I urge everyone to read it. It

remains for me one of the key handbooks on Christian nonviolence. There, he writes about violence, nonviolence, the God of nonviolence and Jesus' nonviolence with stunning clarity and insight:

Violence is the ethos of our times. It is the spirituality of the modern world. It has been accorded the status of a religion, demanding from its devotees an absolute obedience to death. Its followers are not aware, however, that the devotion they pay to violence is a form of religious piety. Violence is so successful as a myth precisely because it does not seem to be mythic in the least. Violence simply appears to be the nature of things. It is what works. It is inevitable, the last and, often, the first resort in conflicts. It is embraced with equal alacrity by people on the left and on the right, by religious liberals as well as religious conservatives. The threat of violence, it is believed, is alone able to deter aggressors. It secured us years of a balance of terror. We learned to trust the Bomb to grant us peace ... It, and not Christianity, is the real religion of America. [p. 13]

The God whom Jesus reveals refrains from all forms of reprisal and demands no victims. God does not endorse holy wars or just wars or religions of violence. Only by being driven out by violence could God signal to humanity that the divine is nonviolent and is antithetical to the Kingdom of Violence. The reign of God means the complete and definitive elimination of every form of violence between individuals and nations. [p. 149]

In recent decades, there have been many outstanding books about creative nonviolence and resistance to evil, but no one has ever explained the Sermon on the Mount the way Walter Wink did. It's as if the church misunderstood Jesus for 2,000 years until Walter Wink came along and examined it word for word. His scholarly analysis, based in his own experience of nonviolent resistance and peace movement work, is a revelation. He demonstrates how Jesus teaches Galilean peasants a way to nonviolently resist the Roman Empire through aggressive, active nonviolence. "Jesus' teaching on nonviolence forms the charter for a way of being in the world that breaks the spiral of violence," Walter Wink writes. He continues:

Jesus reveals a way to fight evil with all our power without being transformed into the very evil we fight. It is a way -- the only way possible -- of not becoming what we hate. "Do not counter evil in kind" -- this insight is the distilled essence, stated with sublime simplicity, of the experience of those Jews who had, in Jesus' very lifetime, so courageously and effectively practiced nonviolent direct action against Rome. Jesus abhors both passivity and violence. He articulates, out of the history of his own people's struggles, a way by which evil can be opposed without being mirrored, the oppressor resisted without being emulated, and the enemy neutralized without being destroyed. [p. 189]

Walter's exegesis of Matthew 5:39 shocks everyone when they first hear it. Here's an excerpt:

"If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other one to him as well." Why the *right* cheek? A blow by the right fist in that right-handed world would land on the *left* cheek of the opponent. An open-handed slap would also strike the left cheek. To hit the right cheek with a fist would require using the left hand ... The only way one could naturally strike the right cheek with the right hand would be with the back of the hand. We are dealing here with insult, not a fistfight. The intention is clearly not to injure but to humiliate, to put someone in his or her place ... A backhand slap was the usual way of admonishing inferiors. Masters backhanded slaves; husbands, wives; parents, children; men, women; Romans, Jews. We have here a set of unequal relations, in each of which retaliation would invite retribution. The only normal response would be cowering submission. Why then does he counsel those already humiliated people to turn the other cheek? Because this action robs the oppressor of the power to humiliate. The person who turns the other cheek is saying, in effect, "Try again. Your first blow failed to achieve its intended effect. I deny you the power to humiliate me. I am a human being just like you. Your status does not alter that fact. You cannot demean me." [Pp. 175-176]

As he explains the militant nonviolence of Jesus, Walter also describes how nonviolent movements for social change are transforming the world. His analysis of the breadth of those movements is equally astonishing, first of all, because we rarely hear about them in the mainstream media. "In just the last few years, nonviolence has emerged in a way that no one ever dreamed it could emerge in the world," Walter writes.

In 1989, there were thirteen nations that underwent nonviolent revolutions. All of them successful except one, China. That year, 1.7 billion people were engaged in national nonviolent revolutions. That is a third of humanity. If you throw in all of the other nonviolent revolutions in all the other nations in the twentieth century, you get the astonishing figure of 3.34 billion people involved in nonviolent revolutions. That is two thirds of the human race. No one can ever again say that nonviolence doesn't work. It has been working like crazy. [*Jesus' Third Way*]

Walter Wink gave us a theological foundation for our work for peace, justice and nonviolence. I hope and pray his works will continue to be read and studied and that more Christians will come to understand the nonviolence of Jesus -- the church's "vocation of nonviolence," as he put it -- and the power we have in grassroots movements of nonviolent resistance.

Thank you, Walter Wink, for your brilliant scholarship and steadfast teaching of Gospel nonviolence. Your work will bear good fruit and help more and more of us to obey and teach the Sermon on the Mount as you did. What a great gift.

John Dear will speak June 22 and 23 at the [Wildgoose Festival](#) [2] in North Carolina. His new book, [Lazarus, Come Forth!](#) [3], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to [John Dear's website](#) [4]. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book [Challenging Empire](#) [5]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, [Divine Rebels](#) [6] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including [Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings](#) [7]; [Put Down Your Sword](#) [8] and [A Persistent Peace](#) [9], are available from Amazon.com.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.walterwink.com>

[2] <http://www.wildgoosefestival.org>

[3]

[http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1570759367/ref=pd_lpo_k2_dp_sr_1?pf_rd_p=486539851&pf_rd_s=lpo-top-stripe-1&pf_rd_t=201&pf_rd_i=1584200405&pf_rd_m=ATVPDKIKX0DER&pf_rd_r=1GYTD8AM60PI)

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[4] <http://www.johndear.org>

[5] <http://www.fosna.org/>

[6] [http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rebels-American-Christian-](http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rebels-American-Christian-Activists/dp/1569762643/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326209314&sr=8-1)

[Activists/dp/1569762643/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326209314&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/Divine-Rebels-American-Christian-Activists/dp/1569762643/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1326209314&sr=8-1)

[7] [http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-](http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-Berrigan-Essential-Writings-Spiritual/dp/1570758379/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348569&sr=1-1)

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[8] <http://www.amazon.com/Put-Down-Your-Sword->

Nonviolence/dp/0802863574/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348607&sr=1-1

[9] [http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-](http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1)

[World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1](http://www.amazon.com/Persistent-Peace-Struggle-Nonviolent-World/dp/0829427201/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1318348624&sr=1-1)

[10] <http://ncronline.org/email-alert-signup>