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Engaging the world:

The intersection of Neocalvinism and Walter Wink

Christians are to be “in the world, but not of the world.” This is perhaps the single most difficult concept of the Christian life: How does a Christian live in the transforming reality of Christ’s resurrection when evil permeates our everyday lives? How do we live with others who do not believe as we do? How do we engage the culture around us faithfully?

Neocalvinism, supplemented, in part, with the work of theologian Walter Wink, addresses these kinds of questions and provides a solid framework that, if fully articulated and internalized, provides many of the tools necessary to live a radically transformed life and to engage the world obediently.

Neocalvinism stems from a revival in Dutch Calvinist communities at the end of the nineteenth century and found its earliest expression in the work of Dutch theologian and statesmen Abraham Kuyper.¹ Kuyper, during his Princeton Lectures on Calvinism in 1898, argued that Calvinism was unique among the Protestant traditions of his day in its unity as *Weltanschauung*—or life-system and worldview—and therefore was best positioned to provide an alternative to prevailing life-systems—Modernism, Paganism and, we could now add, Postmodernism. Instead of concentrating on apologetics, Kuyper insisted that Christianity needed to provide the Christian with an all-encompassing worldview through which to understand the world. A general life-system needs to provide insight into the three fundamental

¹ Bartholomew and Strauss, 6

relations in human life: 1) our relation to God; 2) our relation to other humans; and 3) our relation to the world. Calvinism, with its insistent theology of God’s sovereignty, fit the bill.² Kuyper elucidated the point succinctly in his most famous quote: “There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is sovereign over all, does not cry ‘Mine!’”³ Opponents to the Dutch revival labeled the movement spearheaded by Kuyper “Neocalvinism,” a name eventually embraced by the movement itself.

At the core of Neocalvinism as life-system is a particular emphasis on the Bible as narrative understood in three primary parts: creation, fall and redemption. God created the entire cosmos and is sovereign over the entire creation. In creation, God created distinct things and set forward a good and perfect order for each thing. Unfortunately, these intentions were distorted by the disobedience of humanity and all of reality was placed under the curse of sin. But cosmic redemption, in that the entire creation experiences restoration, has been secured in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and will be consummated upon his return. The gospel, then, is the healing power that restores creation to its originally intended design. This should not be taken to imply, however, that God’s design is stagnant. Human historical developments—whether cultural, technological or otherwise—are appropriate responses to the cultural mandate, God’s call for humanity to realize possibilities inherent in creation, and, when consistent with God’s intention, these developments will be incorporated into the new heaven and the new earth.

It is here that Neocalvinism intersects with Wink most vividly, providing a richer and more nuanced perception of the creation, fall, redemption model. Though Wink and the Neocalvinists disagree on the implications of this theology, their combined work in this area is

² Kuyper

³ Van Til, x

radically powerful and important for thoroughly Christian engagement in the world. Wink's work in his Powers series, specifically *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, is particularly important because it helps deepen the Christian approach to systems.

Understanding the nature of the Powers is foundational to the character of this intersection and to Wink's primary thesis: the Powers are good; the Powers are fallen; the Powers must be redeemed. These three, according to Wink, are inseparable and simultaneous in nature. While firmly acknowledging the "Principalities and Powers" described in the Bible are real, Wink suggests that they are not found in the otherworldly winged beasts popularized by author Frank Peretti. Peretti's *This Present Darkness* was one of the most popular books in Christian fiction in the 1990s. Its descriptions of the violent battles fought all around us by invisible angels and demons captivated the imagination of many Christians, and conversations about spiritual warfare reached a fevered pitch in some Christian circles. The current Christian bestseller mainstay, the *Left Behind* series, shares similar themes and popularity.

Unfortunately, the pop theology informing both these fictional narratives is deeply flawed, contributing to a misunderstanding of the role of demonic forces in our world and the Christian response to those forces. Wink asserts that they are, in reality, the inner spiritual forces intrinsic to our institutions and cultures; a demon is "the actual spirituality of systems and structures that have betrayed their divine vocations."⁴ Wink uses the term "Domination System" to describe the phenomenon that occurs when networks of Powers succumb to and incorporate around idolatrous values. According to Wink, we are living in an epoch of Domination, in which entire systems have rebelled against their created purposes. Instead of the withdrawal attitude of fear fostered by pop theology, though, "the recognition of [the Powers] redefines the life of faith

⁴ Wink, 9

as a genuine agonistic situation in which intentional resistance must be practiced.”⁵ Likewise, Neocalvinism acknowledges an ultimate religious conflict, or an antithesis, in all of life. This struggle between submitting to God’s authority or rebelling against it is a part of every individual and institution. It is not a struggle relegated to a spiritual realm, rather it is a struggle integrated into all aspects of everyday life.

Wink’s exploration of the origins of demonic control over the Powers is particularly enlightening in this regard. At the core of the Domination System, he argues, is the belief in and practice of redemptive violence. He traces the origins of redemptive violence to the Babylonian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, in which the god Marduk slays Tiamat, another god, and creates the world from her corpse. Humans are then created from the blood of a god who is sacrificed for having sided with Tiamat in the battle. Violence and chaos are interwoven in the establishment of the world and humans are created from death. Evil originates before creation, making it the natural order of things, and it can only be overcome through violence.⁶ Though rooted in the ancient Near East, evidence that this belief has infiltrated our current thinking pervades our popular culture, in television programs, films and political discourse. The plot of redemptive violence is simple and easy to recognize: bad guy has control; underdog good guy comes onto the scene and, through his clever use of violence, destroys the bad guy and restores order.

The biblical creation narrative was written during Babylonian exile, giving the *Enuma Elish* added significance as the ideology competing for Jewish attention and making the contrast between the two accounts quite dramatic and important. In Genesis, God speaks the world into existence, creating order from a benign chaos. God does not need to resort to violence in order to create; God’s sovereignty is such that the creation obeys God’s words. Humanity is not the

⁵ Brueggemann, 181

⁶ Wink, 14-15

result of the sacrifice of a traitor god; rather, we are created in the image of loving God and given authority in the creation. It is a result of a freely made human decision that evil enters the world. “In this far more complex and subtle explanation of the origins of things, evil for the first time emerges as a problem requiring a solution,” writes Wink.⁷

But there is another crucial difference between these two accounts. In the Babylonian epic, humans are created to do the bidding of the gods and Marduk’s adopted son, the king of Babylon. The Biblical account contrasts this most vividly in the idea that the Creator of the world desires a loving relationship with the creation. God walks with the first humans and sets them about the task of creative work, specifically, naming the animals. Neocalvinist philosopher Calvin Seerveld, in his book *Rainbows for the Fallen World*, suggests this work is built into the created order and we need to understand the implications today:

Unless the first chapters of Genesis are simply a handy preface to God’s revelation to refute macro-evolutionistic theories, Christians must hear what the Spirit is saying there to the churches, if they want the life perspective of biblically straightened-out believers. Culture is not optional. Formative culturing of creation is intrinsic to human nature, put there purposely—God knows why.⁸

Humans were not created as slaves to the gods and the king; rather, humans were created with freedom under God’s sovereignty and given an intrinsic will to create. Whether we go about our culturing activity in obedience to God’s good created order is at the heart of Christian cultural engagement.

Instead of advocating a defensive position, as in the case of pervasive pop theology, Neocalvinism insists on an offensive position. Humanity has been invited to participate in restoring and conforming all of life to its created purpose; indeed, we are given mandate to do so in the first chapters of Genesis. Attempting to live wholly apart from so-called godless culture,

⁷ Wink, 14

⁸ Seerveld, 24

then, is simply an untenable option because humans are inextricably bound to the systems around and through which human activity is ordered. Such systems are a part of the created order.

Before Christians can discern created purposes in order to engage in Wink’s call to resistance, we need to briefly examine the broad implications of creation. God created the whole of existence, giving unique and distinct purpose to each created thing. Theologian Albert Wolters uses the terms “structure” and “direction” to distinguish between the distinct created purpose of an institution—structure—and the sinful deviation from its structural ordinance—direction. The components of our everyday lives—family, work, government, emotions, thinking ... everything—all have distinct creational purposes and all are engaged in religious conflict, antithesis, because of the fall and “*for the sake* of the created structure.”⁹

Wolters describes the Christian working from this perspective:

Because they believe that creational structure underlies all of reality, they seek and find evidence of lawful constancy in the flux of experience, and of invariant principles amidst a variety of historical events and institutions. Because they confess that a spiritual direction underlies their experience, they see abnormality where others see normality, and possibilities of renewal where others see inevitable distortion. In every situation, they explicitly look for and recognize the presence of creational structure, distinguishing this sharply from the human abuse to which it is subject.¹⁰

According to Neocalvinism, the basic realities of structure and direction are primary in understanding how to actively engage the world. Echoing Wink, Wolters writes: “The directional battle does not take place on a spiritual plane above creaturely reality but rather occurs *in* and *for* the concrete reality of the earthly creation.”¹¹ The activities and systems in which we take part can either fulfill structural ordinances or move away from them; or, as Wink

⁹ Wolters, 73

¹⁰ Wolters, 73

¹¹ Wolters, 73

would describe it, they can succumb to the Domination System or live in God's Domination-free order.

Wink and Neocalvinism quickly diverge from here, but their combined efforts in this area help define more accurately the framework of a Christian worldview. A comprehensive life-system is absolutely necessary if the Christian is to engage the world without losing the distinctness of Christianity. Neocalvinism, viewed as a worldview and not merely a tradition within the Protestant branch of Christianity, provides a firm foundation on which to build, through the help of others such as Walter Wink, a thoroughly biblical *Weltanschauung*.

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