



# Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence

*Walter Wink*

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## **Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence** Walter Wink

'In his remarkable trilogy on the principalities and powers, Walter Wink has biblically verified what more and more of us have come to realize intuitively: namely, that underneath and within the social, economic, and political crisis we face, there are profoundly spiritual realities which must be confronted.' -Jim Wallis, Sojourners

## **Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence Details**

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## From Reader Review Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence for online ebook

### Richard says

This book stretched me and my thinking. it is refreshing to find a book that does this. The normal comment applies, I did not agree with everything he wrote, but that is what made it fun to read and to reflect on how to apply it. I am looking forward to reading the last book in the series.

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### Josh says

Even if I don't agree with everything Wink says, I appreciate his project here. He looks at how we might understand supernatural language in the present day.

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### Greg Williams says

After reading the first volume of this trilogy ("Naming the Powers"), I was intrigued enough to start reading this one. Whereas the first volume focused on the New Testament language used to identify "The Powers that Be", this volume focuses on identifying ("unmasking") the influence of those powers in our lives. Wink writes: "The goal of such unmasking is to enable people to see how they have been determined, and to free them to choose, insofar as they have a genuine choice, what they will be determined by in the future." In other words, we are being constantly influenced by spiritual forces and powers that we are for the most part unaware of (and which the materialist worldview of our culture refuses to acknowledge). By unmasking these influences, we can recognize them in our lives and have the freedom to choose whether to resist or follow.

In this volume, Wink "unmasks" the influence of Satan, demons, angels, and "the elements of the universe". And like the first volume, I found this book to be really thought-provoking and it blew my mind at several points. Some of things that stick out in my mind are:

\* The nature of Satan and the satanic is to be an accuser or an "agent provocateur". We often experience Satan's influence as an inner voice of condemnation in our heads. But we can also experience it in institutions ("excessive zeal for justice always becomes satanic"). Satan is "the god of this world" because "we human beings have made him god as a consequence of willfully seeking our own good without reference to any higher good." According to Wink, "Whether one believes in Satan is thus not nearly as important as that one recognizes the satanic function as part and parcel of every decision." To resist Satan, we must live based on "every word that proceeds from the mouth of God".

\* The demonic is "a will to power asserted against the created order. It is the psychic or spiritual power emanating from organizations or individuals or subspects of individuals whose energies are bent on overpowering others." "It is our fear itself which gives the demonic its power." The best way to deal with the demonic is love. It is love alone that heals the demonic.

\* When the Bible talks about "the angel of a church" or "the angel of a nation", it is talking about the actual spirituality of those corporate entities. Wink writes that these collective entities "do have an inner spirit,

though our culture has been trained to ignore it. To that degree, their angels are real, whether they possess personal metaphysical reality apart from their function or not." They represent both the personality and the vocation of the collective entities (where "vocation" means what God intended as their purpose). The angel of a corporate entity becomes demonic when it turns its back on the specific tasks set before it by God.

\* With respect to pagan gods, they are alive and well in our culture even if our culture denies their existence. "Aphrodite is alive and well and inspiring a profitable sex industry, grossing billions. Ares/Mars is alive and well and devouring more money, material, scientific creativity, and human flesh for past, present, and future wars than all the gods combined. Dionysus is alive and well and staging a major revival in voodoo, the charismatic movement, the drug culture, the rock scene . . ."

\* The "elements of the universe" and the "angels of nature" represent the spirituality of matter and nature. They are mighty powers that in a sense rule our world and were created by God. As such, they are theophanies that reveal God to us. They should compel us to worship the one true God who created all things. However, when we worship matter and the physical laws (as materialism does) or nature, we give them power over us and commit idolatry.

There is so much more in this book than I'm able to summarize in a review. If any of this intrigues you, I'd encourage you to give this book a try. Like the first volume, this is more of a scholarly book that can be a difficult read at times. I basically read each chapter twice to make sure I understood what was being said. As for me, I'm hooked. So I'm going to read the third volume, "Engaging the Powers" in the near future while this stuff is still fresh in my mind.

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## David says

Second book in Wink's powers trilogy. Short and focused, like the first, examining various forces in the Bible such as angels and satan. Wink provides a middle ground between those who discount all the Bible says about the supernatural and those who simply take it literally. I don't have much to add from my review of the first book. The ground is being set for the third book, which is longer than the first two put together.

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## Ethan says

The author's second volume in his trilogy on the Powers. Whereas Fortress Press has released Kindle editions for volumes #1 and #3, there is no such edition for the all-critical volume #2, which is odd and not a little frustrating, but hey, there's the library, so it's all good.

Having spent volume #1 (Naming the Powers) assessing the Biblical data regarding the use of terms, and drawing a few conclusions, volume #2 focuses on seven distinct types of the Powers: Satan, demons, angels of the churches, angels of the nations, gods, elements of the world, and angels of nature.

The trilogy reflects Wink's personal journey from an attempt to analyze what Scripture had to say about the Powers as a detached observer to the unsettling recognition that there is most likely far more going on in the spiritual realm than we can ever understand and that we have attempted to suppress in our post-Enlightenment culture. In the Epilogue he establishes the argument he has tried to make: the spiritual realm is the interiority of earthly existence (p. 172).

This concept informs the discussion throughout: as individuals have both a physical and spiritual existence,

and those inter-relate and permeate in many ways, so it is with the environment and all human groupings and institutions. At times Wink seems to buy into the embodiment of such spiritualities in the forms of Satan, demons, or angels; at other times he seems to be calling a collective spirituality by such embodied names; the ambivalence is part of the project as a post-Enlightenment and yet fully modernist man of the late 20th century trying to grapple with a very pre-modern and enchanted perspective.

His exposition on Satan, the Angels of the Churches, and the Angels of the Nations come with the strongest Biblical grounding. The discussion of Satan is compelling, putting the Biblical evidence at the fore, willing to see Satan as a servant of God in many respects, an over-zealous prosecutor, and in terms of being the Evil One a chameleon, perhaps led to such because of persistent human rebellion: the embodiment of not only the potential but also the actual spiritual consequences of rebellion against God. The warning that Satan can induce to excessive strictures as much as licentiousness is sorely needed to be heard. The Angels of the Churches takes seriously the letters of Revelation 2-3; he pointed out that many of the second person statements to the churches are in the singular, as if truly addressed to the angel of the church. Such takes seriously the idea that a given congregation has its own spirituality above and beyond that of its individual constituent members, whether in reality that spirituality has an embodied form or not, and that the culture/environment of the collective needs to be taken as seriously as the spiritual lives of its individual members. The Angels of the Nations is rooted in Daniel 10, the angel of the prince of Persia hindering an angel from God visiting Daniel, and would speak to the embodied spirituality of a whole nation. In this way Wink can simultaneously affirm the transnational Kingdom of God in Christ while still advocating for God having a purpose for the "angel" of a nation, and to understand and explain how citizens of a given nation share in its spirituality and thus both its benefits and its "sins" (thus Daniel prays a penitential prayer for the nation in Daniel 9; thus Jesus divides all people by nation in Matthew 25; thus the tree of life has leaves for the healing of the nations in Revelation 22). Thus America need not be a "Christian nation" as much as a nation who fulfills the purposes God has established for it in righteousness and justice; it cannot supplant the Kingdom of God but can prove subservient to it.

His discussions of the demonic, the gods, the elements of the world, and the angels of nature do speak often of Scripture but are also more heavily influenced by Jungian psychology and apocryphal/pseudepigraphal literature. This need not mean that Wink is wrong in all such suggestions. The discussion of the demonic also involves a Girardian exploration of the Gerasene demoniac and a helpful contrast between the influence of actual spiritual forces of darkness vs. the dark side of personality traits. The idea of collective possession, a la Jung, that we cast out the idea of individual demonic possession to see whole societies get taken over by demonic forces (and not little demons infesting people as much as whole groups of people falling prey to delusions and collective psychopathologies. The premise that "collective demonism is the abdication of human answerability to God and the investment of final judgment in a divinized mortal" (p. 51) seems eerily prescient. The idea of baptism as exorcism, as a casting off of the demonic of the world to serve the true and living God, has merit. In "the gods" Wink again relies heavily on Jung ("the gods never died; they just became diseases, p. 108), and puts stronger emphasis on the Scriptures which suggest monolatry rather than monotheism, that YHWH is indeed the One True God, while other perceived divinities are actually just lesser divinities appointed by God to rule the nations, and they have often gone their own way in rebellion against Him. In this way he can make good sense of Psalm 82 and a host of other passages but at the expense of the robust monotheism of Isaiah 40-55. He would say the gods are not to be worshiped but they are to be recognized for who they are; he is able to marshal good evidence from early Christianity suggesting that Christians did not deny the existence of many of the gods but considered them as daemons. That there are spiritual forces behind the embodiments named by pagans Ishtar/Aphrodite, Ares, etc., is a much stronger, more robust idea; one could perhaps get behind them as daemons, spiritual authorities over forces, which people mistakenly served as gods; but as "the gods" it seems more difficult to accept.

The discussion of the elements of the universe, the stoicheia, does not come without Biblical rooting (cf. Colossians 2:8-9) but by necessity goes beyond it to discuss how in materialism these things which are to testify to the Creator and provide what Wink calls "theophanies," moments of the realization of God, have

instead become atomized and used for the exact opposite purpose than for which they were created. The premise is taken further with the angels of nature: Wink indicts the modern scientific worldview for needlessly disassociating humanity from the cosmos, assuming that we can look at functions and processes atomistically and in isolation as opposed to understanding everything as a coherent whole in which we are inextricably connected, but has confidence based on recent discoveries in science to suggest that the pendulum must swing back (good luck with that). It is a compelling point: why do we presume that most of the material universe is "dead" and we are "alive" if YHWH, in whom we live and move and have our being, suffuses the material universe and is the Existent One? By shifting to mechanism and away from a "living universe," all "nonliving" things can be taken and used and exploited, and has led to our rampant, runaway consumerism and environmental degradation. By killing off most of the universe we have built a culture of death; the fact so many "find God" in the wilderness testifies to the strong power of the Creation (and another concern about worshipping what should instead be pointing us back to God, as Wink himself declares). It would also fit the paradigm that just as there is an oppositional spiritual force as potential/actual disobedience, spiritual forces behind the demonic, and a spirituality of any and every human collective, including nations, that there would be spirituality/spiritualities behind the forces of nature. Again, not to be worshiped, but to point back to their Creator and to praise Him as declared in the Psalms.

Wink gives the reader no end of things on which to ponder; it's a massive challenge to anyone who wants to faithfully embody Christianity while living in the shadow of the Enlightenment. Wink persuasively shows how the worldview of the first century and before was pervaded by such ideas of spiritual forces and powers; yet, in himself, as with the rest of us, there must be grappling with how much they really understood, how much was "mere superstition," and how much "we" have rejected, thanks to Enlightenment philosophy and thinking, that the ancients truly understood better than we.

Nevertheless, Wink has done a service by doing the research, putting forth the ideas, and forcing us to grapple with them.

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### **Paul Birch says**

I started reading the trilogy with the third book Engaging the Powers and still find that one the best of the three. Unmasking the powers filled some of the gaps in discernment but doesn't have the breadth of the third title. Well written and researched although I cannot ascribe to some of Wink's theories, or perhaps they are just metaphor. Enjoyable though

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### **James says**

The second book in Walker Wink's outstanding trilogy. This is the only modern, thorough, scholarly look at the powers that appear in our Scriptures that I'm aware of. Very good, very thought provoking. While I don't agree with all of his conclusions, they have to be taken seriously. I particularly appreciate Wink's look at modern evils like nuclear weapons and the destruction of the environment. The last two chapters clearly align with much of Matthew Fox's thinking, and likely informed some of Fox's work.

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### **Stephen Hayes says**

At first glance I thought he had written the book that I always wanted to write, but on closer

examination I saw that he hadn't. But there is sufficient overlap that most publishers would not be willing to look at another book on the same subject

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## Jacob Aitken says

This. Book. Was. Awful. I knew that it was written by a hippie and would have some howlers. Fair enough. I can live with that. Indeed, there was much good insight and psychology, However, I had to draw the line when he suggested we "relate to the gods" in ways that the church did not. So, here we go.

Wink begins on a promising note in seeing the explosive way that the occult came into biblical self-reflection around the time of Christ. Hellenization: humanity began to perceive itself. It also began to perceive the dark shape of things through symbol. Intermediate beings operative among people.

symbolic projection: a way a people describes the interiority of things in the only way possible. The interiority of a social institution is perceived as a spiritual being (4). This doesn't have to be overly mystical. Every economic system, power elite, and social institution does have a spiritual essence.

\*What the ancients called "spirits" were in fact real entities, only not hovering in air (5).

"A reassessment of these powers allows us to reclaim, name, and comprehend types of experiences that materialism renders mute and inexpressible" (7).

His has a problematic chapter on Satan. While he is fairly sensitive to the biblical reading, I don't think he factors in what the texts imply for other texts. True, Satan in the OT is not always presented as the Miltonian figure we think of. However, Jesus calls him a liar and murderer from the beginning.

From all of this Wink concludes that Satan's fall is an archetypal moment in the human psyche (24). Wink clearly rejects the idea of Satan as a person (26), though a more accurate reading of biblical theology would see Satan as a personality.

Satan has an inner and outer reality. When we encounter "primordial evil," Wink suggests those are archetypal images of Satan. Our reflection upon that falls under the more common term "Satan." "Belief in Satan provides a grid" upon which we make sense of experiences of evil (25).

## Demons

What is the cause of demonic manifestation in social structures or personal pathologies? Persons function within a network of relations. Personal healing is not isolated from these structures and networks.

Outer demonic: represents the actual inner spirit of these supra human entities. What we normally call "demon possessed." Institutional spirits rule from within.

Inner personal demonic: It is when we struggle to integrate a fractured psyche, split personality, old guilt, etc.

Collective:

Mental illness: caused (Partly) by class antagonism, conflicts with tradition, exploitation, etc.

Mental illness and culture: each culture has its own insanity. Some mania epidemics follow in the wake of war and social unrest.

Collective possession: Today we are more likely to see mass possession rather than the classic “exorcist” case.

Wink acknowledges the reality of “guest spirits” via occult paraphernalia (58). However, he defines demonic possession as “an estrangement from one’s self as imago Dei and full social being” (59). The problem with this definition is that it doesn’t make sense of his previously acknowledged “guest spirits.” Further, he admits that “outer personal demons do possess knowledge beyond that of their hosts, albeit a meager knowledge.” Very true, but it doesn’t fit with his definition of demonic activity.

## Angels

Wink suggests that *aggelos* in Revelation 2-3 refers not to a specific bishop, nor to what we normally call “angels,” but that the church in its totality refers to an angelic manifestation. There are some problems to this, but a case can be made for it. The “you” in these chapters is always singular, not plural. Further, if *aggelos* does refer to a messenger or bishop, then why does the term never refer to that afterwards?

Wink suggests that “angel and people are the inner and outer aspects of the same reality” (72). Bizarrely enough, the angel is held accountable for the church’s action.

Discerning the Angel of a Church (This was a very useful section)

1. architecture and ambience. This reflects a congregation’s desires.
2. Economic class of the members.
3. Power structure. This reflects both leadership personality and denominational structure (episcopalian, baptist, etc).
4. How does the congregation handle conflict? Sometimes church conflicts go back generations.
5. How does a congregation see itself? Is there vision or has the pastor given up?

Following Origen, Wink suggests that when a congregation comes together, there are two groups. The present group and a latent, shadow group.

## Ministering to the Angel of a Church

The angel can only be confronted by Christ via a human, prophetic intermediary. God does this, rather than speaking directly to the corporate angels, because, as Wink suggests, heaven is the realm of transcendence latent within human possibility (81). Okay, that’s just silly but he does capture an important truth: heaven is not “up there,” but rather that which is beyond the veil.

## Interesting Insights

Contradiction within evil: evil is fragmentary and so can never achieve the totalization it seeks (30).

\*Wink says Gnosticism became the Christian unconscious (36). If by that he means Gnosticism sees itself as Christianity’s shadow (which shadow concept is itself a Masonic and occultic concept), then he is right. The problem is that he subsumes a lot of various groups under the moniker “Gnosticism” and then opposes that ambiguous term to some stereotypical fundamentalist Christianity.

## Criticisms

~Wink gives away too much, too uncritically, to “modern cosmologies” (5).

~He speaks of “this primordial power of evil” (25) as opposed to a Satan-personality (not sure why they are mutually exclusive?) yet this raises the question: from where (who?) did this primordial power of evil originate? He wrestles with this very question (27ff), even coming across various insights and questions (e.g., does Satan gain access by our neuroses? Washington and Moscow are actually on the same side), yet dodges any real answer.

~Is he saying that the fragmentary nature of evil (i.e., the Satan, if you will) is what prevents our realizing self-transcendence (30)? What is this but Gnosticism?

~He defends paganism (24, 36). Seriously, I am not kidding. Perhaps he is saying we shouldn’t demonize (oops!) the Other. Fair enough, but has he done research on Moloch worship?

~He engages in emotional blackmail (182 n94). He tells the story of a woman who grew up Roman Catholic, wanted to become a priest but denied access. She got angry, became a prostitute, and joined the church of Satan (later she was redeemed). A sad story, to be sure, but what conclusion does he want us to draw?

~Wink engages in inflammatory rhetoric, as in Spanish “thugs” (74). Mind you, I have no love for colonial Roman Catholicism, but this seems more like “sneaking in a cheap shot.”

~He pushes his own agenda. Either a church is “self-engrossed or engaged in social justice” (76), which usually means the Democratic National Convention.

~Advocates a one-world government (102). This follows upon a particularly astute discussion of nationalism and how nations are biblical. Not sure how his two theses mesh.

Conclusion:

Does this book have anything to offer? Sure. Some chapters are good but where he is wrong, he is very wrong.

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## Gene says

See comments on Naming the Powers Vol I of this three volume series.

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