

FORG FORUM, JANUARY 14, IN REMEMBRANCE OF REV. DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

## ENGAGING RACISM

Good morning!

I'm Cornelia Parkes, a member of Friends for Racial Justice. Other members of the committee here are Dan Fitzmartin, Betsy Roper, and Nancy Frost and members not present today are Polly Atwood, clerk, Diana Lopez, Chris Clamp, Trish Hogan, Kim West, and Byron Parrish. I'm very grateful to the committee for the advice and encouragement they gave me for presenting our annual forum in remembrance of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I'm starting on time because my talk will take about half an hour and I want to leave some time for discussion afterwards.

The title of my talk "Engaging Racism" is taken from the title of the book by Walter Wink *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* published in 1992. Have any of you read it? It's not new, but it could have been written today. All the disfunctions in our society that are so obvious today were already here 30 years ago and more to those who could see them. Our advantage today is that more of us see them. We have Trump to thank for that.

When we talk about racism, I assume that everyone here is acquainted with the concept of white privilege, how it came about, and how it disadvantages people of color. This is all important. But, relax! I'm not going to talk about that. Most of us have a less firm understanding of the institutional or systemic racism that creates white privilege. This is what I want to talk about. What is institutional racism, how does it work, and what can we do about it? And, I will use Wink's book on *Engaging the Powers* as my guide.

In this book, Wink explores the problem of evil today and how it relates to the New Testament concept of Principalities and Powers. He asks and answers the question "How can we oppose evil without creating new evils and becoming ourselves part of the evil system?"

To begin with, we need to get a handle on the difference between an institution and an individual and how an institution can be evil, but an individual not. Notice, in doing this we are already challenging the systems worldview that seeks to blur the distinction. The best way to see the difference is with a story—a good story—like the *Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck, for example. Wink quotes this passage.

*The owners of the land came onto the land, or more often a spokesman for the owners came.... Some of the owner men were kind because they hated what they had to do, and some of them were angry because they hated to be cruel, and some of them were cold because they had long ago found that one could not be an owner unless one were cold. And all of them were caught in something larger than themselves.... If a bank or a finance company owned the land, the owner man said, the Bank—or the Company—needs—wants—insists—must have—as though the Bank or Company were a monster, with thought and feeling, which had ensnared them. These last would take no responsibility for the banks or the companies because they were men and slaves, while the banks were machines and masters all at the same time.... The owner men sat in the cars and explained. You know the land is poor. You've scabbled at it long enough, God knows.*

*The squatting tenant men nodded and wondered and drew figures in the dust, and yes, they knew, God knows. If the dust only wouldn't fly. If the top would only stay on the soil, it might not be so bad....*

*Well, it's too late. And the owner men explained the workings and the thinkings of the monster that was stronger than they were.... You see, a bank or a company... those creatures don't breathe air, don't eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money. If they don't get it they die the way you die without air, without side-meat. It is a sad thing, but it is so. It is just so.... The bank—the monster has to have profits all the time. It can't wait. It'll die. No, taxes go on. When the monster stops growing, it dies. It can't stay one size.*

*We have to do it. We don't like to do it. But the monster's sick. Something's happened to the monster.*

*Sure, cried the tenant men, but it's our land. We measured it and broke it up. We were born on it, and we got killed on it, died on it. Even if it's no good, it's still ours.*

*We're sorry. It's not us. It's the monster. The bank isn't like a man.*

*Yes, but the bank is only made up of men.*

*No, you're wrong there—quite wrong there. The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It's the monster. Men made it, but they can't control it.*

[pause]

To complete the analogy, we can interpret this passage to suggest that all of us here could be anti-racists, and still be complicit with the institution of racism, a system that can force us to do violence to others. This is the first important take home message, but don't worry. I'm not going to leave you there.

Steinbeck's "monster" is what Wink calls the Principalities and Powers. These are not a modern day creation. Wink estimates that they have been around since the Babylonians five thousand years ago. His basic theses, which take him three books to develop, are

*The Powers are good.*

*The Powers are fallen.*

*The Powers will be redeemed.*

Three books—I'm not going to try to present his theses, but I will use his concepts of the domination system and the way of redemption.

The system of domination characterizes the fallen Powers. The domination system has a mythology based on redemptive violence, which is portrayed as the victory of order over chaos. It is a system of control through violence, fear of death, and propagating the domination worldview. This cult of violence is still very much with us today. It is the spirituality of militarism. Once you are aware of it, you can see it

everywhere in popular culture. The myth of redemptive violence offers salvation through identification with the winner. So winning is everything, and might makes right. Wink writes

*Overwhelmed by the giantism of corporations, bureaucracies, universities, the military, and celebrities, individuals sense that the only escape from utter insignificance lies in identifying with these giants and idolizing them as the true bearers of their own human identity.*

Let's pause here to summarize the argument up to this point.

- Institutions are more than people who make up them.
- The domination system is the spirituality of institutions.

With this in mind, listen again to the familiar and prophetic words of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. from his 1967 speech "Beyond Vietnam: A Time to Break the Silence."

*We must rapidly begin the shift from being a "thing-oriented" society to a "person-oriented" society. When the machines and computers, profit motives and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.*

[pause]

How we diagnose the problem determines how we work to overcome it. We can continue to look to the black community to lead in this work.

There are two current black leaders that you should know about. One is the Rev. William Barber who created the Poor People's Campaign: a National Call for Moral Revival, drawing on the unfinished work of Dr. King's Poor People's Campaign, which called for a "revolution of values." Hundreds of local and national partners have joined him. We could do a whole forum on Rev. Barber. I have here [show handout] an excerpt from Rev. Barber's new book, *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement Is Overcoming the Politics and Division of Fear* that was posted last spring on the Moyers & Company website. This piece tells the story of the 2013 Moral Monday multiracial movement in North Carolina. It's long so I only made ten copies. Please take one only if you plan to read it.

The second person is Drew Hart. In the January issue of Friends Journal Steve Chase has a review of Hart's new book *Trouble I've Seen: Changing the Way the Church Views Racism*. Steve writes

*Hart calls all of us in the wider church to become more faithful friends and followers of Jesus in order to resist racism. Hart speaks from the radical black liberation theology tradition and challenges us to see Jesus with new eyes. To start, he urges modern Christians to free themselves from the idol worship of the power-holder's well-crafted white/apolitical/blond/sweet baby/Jesus/god-man holding out tickets to an otherworldly heaven that leaves so many believers conformed and complicit with an oppressive status quo.*

Here is a copy of Steve's review. This is a one-pager, and I have several copies, so help yourself. Unfortunately, I haven't had a chance yet to read the book, but Hart's message echoes in an exciting way the work by Wink on engaging the powers, namely that the problem of institutional racism is a spiritual and moral problem. I believe that Quakers would do well to acknowledge the leadership of the black community.

We also need to acknowledge that the Christian church, as an institution, has fallen prey to the domination system, remembering that the institutional church is different from the community of individual true believers. Quakerism began as a withdrawal from the institutional church. We need to continue this process.

Wink and Hart both urge us to become faithful followers and friends of Jesus in order to address racism. As an aside, when I talk about Jesus, I believe that he is not unique either spiritually or historically and that this does not lessen in any way the importance of his life and teachings to me. The big question remains, however, what are Jesus's teachings?

This is where Wink is a great guide. Through textual analysis of the New Testament, he brings the revolutionary Jesus to life. Jesus's teachings about the "world" are warnings about the domination system that must be resisted. (See [Figure 1.](#)) Jesus embodies the domination-free alternative. There is never any doubt that the domination order will be replaced. Jesus tells us how to do it, but some of the message has been obscured. For example, the admonition that you are all familiar with to not resist evil is, Wink tells us, more correctly translated as "Do not resist evil violently." Non-violence is essential. Violence only creates more violence. As Dr. King put it

*The ultimate weakness of violence is that it is a descending spiral begetting the very thing it seeks to destroy.*

Just as essential, however, is the admonition to love one's enemies. Our false prophets cannot tolerate mention of the love of enemies. The ultimate religious question today is "How can we find God in our enemies?" Nonviolent resistance must be combined with love of the enemy—this is the way that resistance becomes engagement. [Repeat] Engagement is necessary because when the systems of institutional violence are gone, the people will remain.

One by one Wink explores and recasts the teachings in the New Testament into a practical guide for engaging the domination system: assert one's humanity, embarrass the oppressor, refuse to be awed by their power, create cognitive dissonance, and remember that in nonviolent engagement we do not have to succeed, we only have to be faithful.

Here is one final observation from Wink:

*The passion that drove the early Christians to evangelistic zeal was not fueled by the desire to increase church membership or to usher people safely toward heaven. It was fired by relief at being liberated from the delusional game being played by the Dragon to their own detriment and by the determination to set others free. In the final analysis, the gospel is not a message of escape to another world after death, but the rescue from the enticements of "this world."*

In conclusion, I want to broaden our focus from institutional racism to include all institutions of oppression. Because we have interpreted the problem of institutional racism as a spiritual problem, it should be obvious that the same root spiritual cause underlies all forms of oppression. Wherever we are led to engage the domination system, we are working on the same problem whether it is working within a prison or with the formerly incarcerated, standing with native Americans or holding LGBTQ concerns, teaching alternatives to violence or providing sanctuary, holding a vigil for peace on the common or praying for peace in front of Textron and Ratheon, marching for women's rights or walking for the

environment. We are united in a single goal to engage the domination system. Because this is a spiritual issue, I see my next step as going to our Ministry and Counsel and calling them to take a leadership role in being faithful in this work. What is your next step?

The final word I want to leave to the friendly political possum, Pogo, who was so popular when I was in college. His iconic panel shows Owl trudging across a heap of garbage in the forest. Owl says, "It IS hard walking on this stuff." Pogo replies, "Yes, son. We have me the enemy and he is us." In working on this talk I felt the need to create another panel in which Pogo replies, "Yes, son. We have met the Savior and he is us." (See Figure 2.)

I would like you now to turn to the person next to you and talk for about 5 minutes on this query, then we will close with worship sharing.

*In light of what I have shared, what touches you, what calls you, what questions are arising, what might be your next step?*

## Cognitive Dissonance



*Is that a good thing or a bad thing?*

According to the domination system, the end of the world is the end of everything. It is a foolish prophecy believed by the religious fringe. After all the predictions, it hasn't happened, right?

According to Wink, the end of the "world" is the end of worldly powers and the domination system.

According to the myth of redemptive violence, the domination system maintains order in the face of chaos. In fact, the domination system has created the very chaos that could bring the end to everything.



Figure 1

Figure 2



Kelly used his memorable "We have met the enemy..." line again in the Pogo strip published on the second Earth Day in 1971

