

Wink, W 1998 – When the powers fall: Reconciliation and the healing of nations.

Minneapolis: Fortress Press. Price unknown.

Reviewer: Dr Johann Beukes

Walter Wink's book was written for the Life and Peace Institute of Sweden as the introductory volume of a series entitled *Reconciliation and the Church in the transition to democracy*. The overall intent of the series is to support the churches in their attempt to be "faithful and effective agents of true reconciliation" (p vii) in the confusing and rapidly changing social, political and cultural structures of a postmodern world. This book asks serious, provocative and justifiable questions: How does a once-totalitarian state move to full democracy? How do former enemies learn to work together? And what is the role of the churches in fostering reconciliation and national healing?

In attempting to answer these questions, or rather in indicating some of their implications, Wink predictably departs from the intellectual framework of theology of liberation where theory, dogma and intellectual structures are seen to serve revolutionary praxis and its forceful change of social, economic and cultural structures. But from very early on, Wink leads us to understand that theology transcends every particular context: the gospel holds out hope, not just for the local here and now, but for the "whole of humanity" (p 2). This move, coming from within the theology of liberation which is notoriously fixated on

particularity rather than universality, is surprising and offers a seemingly new position. And perhaps this could be described as the hallmark of this deeply compassionate and beautifully written book: in investigating what exactly happens when power transformations and/or demolitions have taken place, it does not conform to the framework from which it seems to stem. Rather than becoming another quest for liberation here and now, Wink seeks to explore deeper, broader and – in my opinion – more meaningful issues: issues *after* the storm, issues concerning the future and not so much the sorrowful past, issues concerning forgiveness and not wrath. Harboured enmity and seeking revenge only perpetuates the power of oppressors to lord it over their victims long after the deed has been done. Wink thus appeals to our sense of humanity throughout the book. However, he himself never grounds that sense in something metaphysical or transcendent; it is an unspoken and immanent sense of what a *human being*, the human condition, entails. God calls us to forgive others and ourselves so that the walls of enmity can be torn down – between races, between sexes, between nations, between classes, between neighbours, between strangers, between family members, between friends. This we are enabled to do because we ourselves have been the enemies of God and yet know ourselves to be forgiven. We are enabled to forgive, in the final instance, because we cannot forgive, and thus have to throw ourselves on God's mercy. The "we" implies *us all*; in every conflict to be observed, all parties to every conflict has been wounded. Needless to say, Wink focuses intensively on, amongst others, the South African situation, with specific reference to the work done by the TRC under guidance of Archbishop Desmond Tutu. He is fair in his comments and shows empathy for both sides: the complexity of power acquisition and transformation in general almost necessitates it.

Guilt and forgiveness are extremely complex notions. South Africans will, nevertheless, have to come to grips with these notions. Some will have to know what exactly they are guilty of; others will have to know exactly what they are supposed to forgive. We South Africans – black and white – simply do not understand what is happening to us. This is because we do not understand guilt and forgiveness. Walter Wink aids us in understanding our various positions and in understanding the various positions of others. He does this as soberly and as objectively as his own intellectual and theological frame of reference allows him. He does this, above all, responsibly. This is why his well-intended book deserves our serious consideration, especially in these anarchical times, when polarisation seems to be growing and to be even greater than ever before.
