

The Powers of Death: Recognition, Resistance, Resurrection

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Abstract

This essay is an invitation to examine the powers of death, particularly the modes by which such powers are manifested in the world, modes that relate to but are irreducible to an individual's life. It considers contributions to the subject from Karl Barth, Walter Wink, and William Stringfellow, among others, to argue that while death and its associated powers are pervasive, they are also penultimate realities. The powers of death meet their end in Jesus Christ. The gospel concerning Jesus Christ is the invitation to live as if such a claim were true, to recognise one for whom death is not foreign territory and in whom death is confronted and its powers brought to nought. It is the invitation to a life in which resistance to the powers of death is possible. It is the invitation to live a life characterised by resurrection.

Keywords: Death, Discipleship, Resurrection, Spirituality, The Powers

Abstrak

Artikel ini adalah sebuah ajakan untuk melihat kuasa kematian, dan khususnya mode di mana kuasa tersebut terwujud di dunia, mode yang berhubungan tetapi tidak dapat direduksi untuk kehidupan individu. Hal ini mempertimbangkan kontribusi dari Karl Barth, Walter Wink, dan William Stringfellow, antara lain untuk menyatakan bahwa sementara kematian dan kekuatan yang terkait meresap, mereka juga merupakan realitas kedua dari belakang. Kuasa maut menemui akhirnya di dalam Yesus Kristus. Injil tentang Yesus Kristus adalah ajakan untuk hidup seolah-olah klaim seperti itu benar, untuk mengenali seseorang yang untuknya kematian bukanlah wilayah asing dan di mana kematian dihadapi dan kuasanya menjadi sia-sia. Ini adalah undangan untuk hidup di mana perlawanan terhadap kekuatan maut dimungkinkan. Itu adalah ajakan untuk menjalani kehidupan yang bercirikan kebangkitan.

Kata-kata Kunci: Kebangkitan, kematian, kuasa, pemuridan, spiritualitas

Introduction: Where Do We See Death These Days?

Where do we see death these days? Where is its presence felt, its powers at work? Can death be resisted? If so, how? And in the face of death, what might religious claims about resurrection mean? This essay is an invitation to think about death in ways beyond the limits of one's own personal end. It is, in other words, an invitation to think about the ways that death manifests "itself" in ways that relate to but are irreducible to an individual's life – the ways that death "enters the world and casts its shadow of meaninglessness over [humanity's] entire existence."¹

John Taylor describes this in terms of an "inner lifelessness" induced by fear. "People," he avers, "shrink from the pain of being fully awake."² There is a proclivity to close one's eyes to the world, a habit that turns the world flat. Like being on some anti-depressant drugs, both the ecstasy and the ugly are pressed out of view. It takes enormous courage, and effort, to live with eyes wide open. Very few do it. Even fewer do it well. It is easier to be less alive. Awareness makes too many demands. "Awareness hurts." Better to "grow a protective shell and become a little blind, a little deaf, a little dead,"³ a little more like the priest and the Levite of whom Jesus spoke and who abandoned their duty to a person mugged and abandoned by the roadside. We inoculate ourselves from noticing. Only those like the Samaritan keep their awareness painfully and responsibly alive. But that is precisely what "turns a stranger into a neighbour,"⁴ and holds open the possibility that the routines of death might be transfigured into the fragrance of life characterised by the impossibility of resurrection.

A chorus of women in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* describe the condition of those plagued by apathy:

We do not wish anything to happen.
Seven years we have lived quietly.
Succeeded in avoiding notice,
Living and partly living.

¹ John Paul II, "The Gospel of Life," in *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1997), 497.

² John V. Taylor, *A Matter of Life and Death* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 21.

³ Ibid., 22.

⁴ Ibid.

There have been oppression and luxury,
There have been poverty and licence,
There has been minor injustice.
Yet we have gone on living,
Living and partly living.
Sometimes the corn has failed us,
Sometime the harvest is good,
One year is a year of rain,
Another a year of dryness,
One year the apples are abundant,
Another year the plums are lacking.
Yet we have gone on living,
Living and partly living.
We have kept the feasts, heard the masses,
We have brewed the beer and cyder,
Gathered wood against the winter,
Talked at the corner of the fire,
Talked at the corner of streets,
Talked not always in whispers,
Living and partly living.
We have seen births, deaths and marriages,
We have had various scandals,
We have been afflicted with taxes,
We have had laughter and gossip,
Several girls have disappeared
Unaccountably, and some not able to.
We have all had our private terrors,
Our particular shadows, our secret fears.
But now a great fear is upon us, a fear not of one but of many,
A fear like birth and death, when we see birth and death alone
In a void apart. We are afraid in a fear which we cannot know, which we
cannot face, which none understands,
And our hearts are torn from us, our brains unskinned like the layers of an
onion, our selves are lost lost
In a final fear which none understands.⁵

That same deadness or “partly living” also afflicts institutions and social systems. Those who think otherwise might reconsider were they to sit through a faith community’s meetings, or a corporation’s AGM, or

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 29–30.

observe a nation's parliament in action. "The violent posturing, the awful jargon of denigration, the masquerade of debate and conference long after decisions have been taken by quite different people – these," as Taylor puts it, "are like the reflexes of something that has already died."⁶ Eliot described the same condition almost a century ago:

We are the hollow men
 We are the stuffed men
 Leaning together
 Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!
 Our dried voices, when
 We whisper together
 Are quiet and meaningless
 As wind in dry grass
 Or rats' feet over broken glass
 In our dry cellar
 Shape without form, shade without colour,
 Paralysed force, gesture without motion.⁷

The Letter to the Ephesians diagnoses likewise: "They live in the emptiness of their minds, their wits darkened, being estranged from the life which is in God through the incomprehension that is in them through the stony hardness of their hearts. They are those who have ceased to feel," (Eph. 4:17–19). Every now and then, something breaks through and one can become aware – just for a splitting moment – that *something* is missing. But this awareness is so brief that it does not really threaten to interrupt the regular transmission that is the status quo. And though many try in various ways – through drugs, with a good argument, or with a spot of retail therapy, for example – to reanimate life and so fend off the boredom that threatens to encroach upon all, they appear to be driven not by the promise of true life but rather by the terrifying thought that even life might be worse than dying for those who have never fully lived.

But some exceptions do seem to exist among us. There are "those who welcome life with all its ambiguity and are kept open to the flow and exchange of that life, [who] seem able to come to terms with their

⁶ Taylor, *A Matter of Life and Death*, 23.

⁷ T. S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), 89.

mortality almost as a matter of small account.”⁸ A prayer, written by an Oxford undergraduate a few days after the outbreak of the First World War, a war in which he subsequently died, provides testimony to this:

To have given me self-consciousness but for an hour in a world so breathless with beauty would have been enough. But thou hast preserved it within me for twenty years now and more, and hast crowned it with the joy of this summer of summers. And so, come what may, whether life or death, and, if death, whether bliss unimaginable or nothingness, I thank thee and bless thy name.⁹

But lest such words seduce us into thinking that death’s shadow is some gentle or passive presence, the Letter to the Ephesians also reminds us: “[O]ur struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12). The past century has observed a renewed interest in the Bible’s witness concerning these principalities and powers that are “at the same time intangible spiritual entities and concrete historical, social, or psychic structures or institutions of all created things and all created life.”¹⁰ Once upon a time, such language about “cosmic powers” and “spiritual forces” was judged to be a part of the Bible’s “antiquated mythology” that more enlightened persons could easily laugh at or ignore. But two world wars changed that, at least for Europeans. “After World War I and especially after the rise of Nazism some theologians began reading these texts with new eyes. They discovered that instead of being antiquated, these passages found a strong resonance in the atmosphere of their own times.”¹¹ At first, the discussion about the meaning of the powers and principalities of which Ephesians speaks was largely bound up with political issues.¹² But it wasn’t long before such language was interpreted with reference to a great host of systems – economic, erotic, technological, etc. – that mark life in our world.

Paul Tillich also observed how these systems are subversive, often parasitic upon things that are also good, a theodical move with a long and pronounced legacy in Christian theology thanks to St. Augustine.

⁸ Taylor, *A Matter of Life and Death*, 28.

⁹ Cited in Taylor, *A Matter of Life and Death*, 28.

¹⁰ Markus Barth, *Ephesians: Translation and Commentary on Chapters 4–6*, vol. 34A of *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1974), 800–01.

¹¹ Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 2nd ed., trans. John Howard Yoder (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1977), 15.

¹² See Berkhof, *Christ and the Powers*, 72–73n3.

They are, in Tillich words, “powers which rule the world ... for good and for evil ... realities which are simultaneously both glorious and terrible; realities full of beauty and full of destructiveness.”¹³ They are also powers that tend to manifest under the cloak of legitimacy, even when they promote violence. So Walter Wink:

All of us deal with the Powers That Be. They staff our hospitals, run City Hall, sit around tables in corporate boardrooms, collect our taxes, and head our families. But the Powers That Be are more than just the people who run things. They are the systems themselves, the institutions and structures that weave society into an intricate fabric of power and relationships. These Powers surround us on every side. They are necessary. They are useful. We could do nothing without them. Who wants to do without timely mail delivery or well-maintained roads? But the Powers are also the source of unmitigated evils.

A corporation routinely dumps known carcinogens into a river that is the source of drinking water for towns downstream. Another industry attempts to hook children into addiction to cigarettes despite evidence that a third of them will die prematurely from smoking-related illnesses. A dictator wages war against his own citizens in order to maintain his grasp on power. A contractor pays off a building inspector so he can violate code and put up a shoddy and possibly unsafe structure. A power plant exposes its employees to radioactive poisoning; the employee who attempts to document these safety infractions is forced off the road by another car and dies. All her documents are missing.

Welcome to the world of the Powers. But the Powers aren't always that brutal. Some people enjoy their jobs. Some businesses make genuine contributions to society. Some products are life enhancing, even lifesaving. The Powers don't simply do evil. They also do good. Often they do both good and evil at the same time. They form a complex web that we can neither ignore nor escape.¹⁴

Jacques Ellul characterised such powers as the relentless and inescapable architecture of society whose operations eclipse and suffuse the actions of individuals: “These forces are identical throughout the world; they are common to all civilization; they are independent of human will; they have a reality not easily separable from their temporary

¹³ Paul Tillich, *The New Being* (London: SCM Press, 1956), 54.

¹⁴ Walter Wink, *The Powers that Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 1–2.

form.”¹⁵ They are both mysterious and also, for Ellul, spiritually rooted, which is one of the reasons that moderns have an aversion to recognising such powers in anything other than wholly material terms. But Ellul boldly asks:

Are they demons in the most elemental and traditional sense? Are they less precise powers (thrones and dominions) which still have an existence, reality, and, as one might say, objectivity of their own? Or do we simply have a disposition of [human beings] which constitutes this or that human factor a power by exalting it as such? ¹⁶

In other words, are the powers any more than “projections of disordered and distorted human dispositions” now “reified as external forces”?¹⁷

Method

In what follows, we shall examine how three twentieth-century theologians understood the powers of death, and particularly the modes by which such powers are manifested in the world, modes that relate to but are irreducible to an individual's life. The three figures of interest here are Karl Barth (a Swiss Reformed theologian), Walter Wink (an American Bible scholar), and William Stringfellow (an American civil rights lawyer). The essay employs documentary analysis to identify their contributions to the subject, and to rehearse their encouragement to those living amid while seeking to expose and resist the powers of death. It argues that while death and its associated powers are pervasive, they are also penultimate realities. The powers of death meet their end in Jesus Christ. The gospel concerning Jesus Christ is the invitation to live as if such a claim were true, to recognise one for whom death is not foreign territory and in whom death is confronted and its powers brought to nought. It is the invitation to a life in which resistance to the

¹⁵ Jacques Ellul, cited in Marva J. Dawn, ed. *Sources and Trajectories: Eight Articles By Jacques Ellul That Set the Stage* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997), 19–20.

¹⁶ Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976), 151.

¹⁷ J. Scott Jackson, “Mapping the Powers: Clues from Ellul,” DET, accessed 3 December, 2020, <http://derevth.blogspot.com/2017/05/mapping-powers-clues-from-ellul.html>.

powers of death is possible. It is the invitation to live a life characterised by resurrection.

Results and Discussion

Death Exercised through the Powers of the State and its Alliance with Mammon

In his unfinished “Lecture Fragments,” Karl Barth reflects on what he calls the “lordless powers.”¹⁸ For Barth, the powers named under various guises in the Second Testament are none other than humanity’s own powers from which humans have become alienated because of their alienation from God. Set loose, such powers acquire what Barth calls the “pseudo-objective” character of “entities with some kind of existence and dominion of their own.”¹⁹ Thus instead of serving human flourishing, such powers become humanity’s master, the “hidden wirepullers in the human’s ... enterprises, movements, achievements, and revolutions.”²⁰ They are, therefore, demonic; no less so than the demons Jesus confronts in the country of the Gadarenes, and elsewhere.

Barth identifies two archetypal lordless powers – (i) the myth of the state; and (ii) its “close relative,” mammon. For Barth, the state (which he also refers to as “Leviathan”, a reference to Hobbes’s work) does not equate to the structure of government itself, but refers instead to the power and ideology of the state when it exalts itself, and breaks loose from and disregards the rule of law.²¹ And mammon, for Barth, references when economic resources, themselves morally neutral, begin to establish their own forces which exert pressure on humanity to submit in obedience. Money is what Barth calls “an intrinsically harmless but useful fiction.” It is an idol, an anti-Christ, that demands and commands our obedience, and when it “meets and joins with that other demon Leviathan” (i.e., the State), it becomes an “absolutist

¹⁸ Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics IV.4: Lecture Fragments*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1981), 213–33.

¹⁹ Barth, *The Christian Life*, 215.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 216.

²¹ Barth, *The Christian Life*, 219. Cf. Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 240–41.

demon,”²² pursuing endless accumulation and relentless commodification, and employing the tools of violence in order to satiate its unyielding appetite for more.

The “Delusional System” and its Overcoming through Non-violence

According to Walter Wink, human beings are already “dead insofar as we have been socialized into patterns of injustice. We died, bit by bit, as expectations foreign to our essence were forced upon us. We died as we began to become complicit in our own alienation and that of others. We died as we grew to love our bondage, to rationalize, justify, and even champion it.”²³ Humans exist, Wink believes, under a consolidated set of “delusional assumptions” about the way the world is. These assumptions are what Colossians 2:8 and 20 call “the elemental spirits of the universe,” or what Wink names “the fundamental assumptions of the Domination System.” He argues that human civilisation is playing a “delusional game” in which these assumptions continually reassert themselves. Games, even the games of death, don’t work without rules. And that game’s rules include the following: that the need to control society and prevent chaos requires some to dominate others; that those who dominate use other people as a means to achieve their own goals; that men are better equipped by nature to be dominant than are women, and that some races are naturally suited to dominate others; that a valued end justifies the use of any means; that violence is both redemptive and the only language enemies understand; and that ruling or managing is the most important of all social functions. It follows that rulers and managers should, therefore, be rewarded with extra privileges and greater wealth; that those who have military strength, who control the most advanced technology, the greatest wealth, or the largest markets, are the ones who will and should survive; that money is the most important value; that the possession of money is a sign and proof of political and social worth; that the production of material goods is more important than the flourishing of healthy people and relationships; that private property is both sacred and an absolute

²² Barth, *The Christian Life*, 224. Cf. Paul Fletcher, “Prolegomena to a Theology of Death,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 50, no. 2 (2008): 139–57.

²³ Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1992), 157.

right; that the greatness and value of any organisation (including a country or a religious body) is measured by its size; that institutions are more important than people; that there is no higher value, being, or power than the state or the corporation, and that if there is a God, God is the protector and patron of such things; and that God (if such a being or beings exist at all) is not revealed to all, but only to select individuals or nations, and their rulers and priesthoods.²⁴

“Christians,” Wink argues, “have docilely sided with their governments, and justified the slaughter of millions of other Christians who, for their part, supported the other side, without any recognition that both sides were serving the values of the kingdom of death.” He continues: “Political elections are not a contest to see which party is capable of the greater compassion, but to see which will be truer to the delusional assumptions (increased military budgets, more prisons, stiffer sentencing for criminals). The church has no more important task than to expose these delusionary assumptions as the Dragon’s game.”²⁵ Wink understands that the Powers that be are not simply people and their institutions, but also include “the spirituality at the core of those institutions and structures.” Therefore, transforming such systems requires addressing not only their outer forms, but also their “inner spirit.”²⁶

In order to break free from this “delusional system,” “we who are dead must die”²⁷ to whatever it is in our social surroundings that has “shaped us inauthentically.” “Those born to privilege and wealth,” for example, must die to the idea that they are “the centre of a universe revolving around their own desires.” Those born to “merciless poverty and the contempt of the ruling class” must die to the idea that they are not fully human. If life is to emerge from death – or after death – “the advantaged must die to their egocentricity” and “the underprivileged must die to their hopelessness, fatalism, and acquiescence in their own despoiling.”²⁸ In addition, Wink argues that “rationalists may need to die

²⁴ Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 95–96.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 96.

²⁶ Wink, *The Powers that Be*, 4.

²⁷ Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 158.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 158.

to idolatry of the mind; dominating personalities to their power; [and] proud achievers to their accomplishments.”²⁹

In support, Wink draws upon the work of the Czech playwright (and later state president) Václav Havel who, while the communist regime was still in power in Czechoslovakia, wrote:

Because the regime is captive to its own lies, it must falsify everything. It falsifies the past. It falsifies the present, and it falsifies the future. It falsifies statistics. It pretends not to possess an omnipotent and unprincipled police apparatus. It pretends to respect human rights. It pretends to persecute no one. It pretends to fear nothing. It pretends to pretend nothing.

Individuals need not believe all these mystifications, but they must behave as though they did, or they must at least tolerate them in silence, or get along well with those who work with them. For this reason, however, they must live within a lie. They need not accept the lie. It is enough for them to have accepted their life with it and in it. For by this very fact, individuals confirm the system, fulfil the system, make the system, are the system.³⁰

One is here reminded of Morpheus’s words to Neo in *The Matrix*: “You have to understand that most of these people are not ready to be unplugged. Many of them are so inert, so hopelessly dependent on the

²⁹ He continues: “This process of dying and rising is menacing to those caught in the myth of redemptive violence because it means facing the evil in themselves, and they see that as equivalent to damnation. For in that myth, salvation consists in identifying oneself as good by virtue of belonging to the right side. Psychologically, this means defining oneself as good in order to achieve a sense of wellbeing. The intolerable pressure of one’s own inner shadow (unacknowledged hatred, anger, violence, lust, greed) can be released then only through projection onto others, against whom it can be exploded in a self-righteous fury. The myth of redemptive violence is mortally threatened by even the smallest amounts of self-knowledge. Jesus’ saying about losing one’s life to find it is paired with another: ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me’ (Mark 8:34). Jesus does not ask for more self-denial ... It is not a question of denying certain things to oneself, like ice cream during Lent, but of disowning the ego’s claim to possess this life. The task is not ego-conquest by means of the ego (a persistent delusion of many of the ‘new spiritualities’ today), but ego-surrender to the redemptive initiatives of God in God’s struggle against the antidivine powers of the world. That means our abandoning egocentricity not only as individuals, but as cultures, as nations, even as a species, and voluntarily subordinating our desires to the needs of the total life system. And because the ego has been entangled with thousands of tendrils from the alienating System of Domination, the process of dying to one’s conditioning is never fully over.” Ibid., 161.

³⁰ Václav Havel, *Living in Truth*, trans. Jan Vladislav (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1987), 45, 56.

system that they will fight to protect it” [i.e., the system, principalities, and powers].³¹

Wink argues that “when anyone steps out of the system and tells the truth, lives the truth, that person enables [others] to peer behind the curtain too” – to, as it were, imagine another way of being in the world, the possibility of living truthfully, despite the repercussions. To step out of the system – to live the truth – is to embrace the power of nonviolence, the counter word to the “institutionalized violence” with which “unjust systems perpetuate themselves.”³² This, he avers, is how Jesus’s disciples are called to live in the midst of the powers, so that Jesus’ resurrection and not death’s power is made manifest in the world:

One does not become free from the Powers by defeating them in a frontal attack. Rather, one dies to their control. Here ... the cross is the model: we are liberated, not by striking back at what enslaves us – for even striking back reveals that we are still determined by its violent ethos – but by dying out from under its jurisdiction and command.³³

Put otherwise, we might say that Jesus calls his followers to be embraced by an alternative imagination for human society where those who put their trust in God come not only “to the aid of their neighbours” but also to the aid of their enemies – even to the point of laying down one’s life for one’s adversary. Those who venture the risk of obedience and so stand exposed before the strangeness of one who calls are those who follow one who puts himself in the way of evil, who intervenes on behalf of the oppressed, the weak, and the downtrodden, and who does so not with swords and spears but by bearing on his body blows and resisting retaliation. Jesus confronts death’s cycles of violence and declares that “the violence stops with me.” He suffers in his own person the wrong that is done, and entrusts the outcome to God. That is the pattern of life the baptised are called to follow. Forgiveness, compassion,

³¹ Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski. *The Matrix*, directed by Lana Wachowski and Lilly Wachowski (Burbank: Warner Bros., 1999), DVD.

³² Wink, *The Powers that Be*, 7. See also Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2004), 95.

³³ Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 157. See also Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984); Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Augsburg Fortress, 1986).

prayer, and sacrifice are the tools that Christ takes up in his war against the powers of death. When those who bear his name take up arms to wage war, and insist that such action is necessary and unavoidable, they are “resorting to a logic other than that of the Logos incarnate.”³⁴

Living Under the Conditions of the Fall

The Dominion of Death

Like Barth and Wink, William Stringfellow too was interested in the ways that death manifests itself in the systems, principalities, and powers of the world. One commentator even suggested that Stringfellow was “fixated on death, obsessed with death beyond normalcy.”³⁵ Stringfellow was a young attorney and lay theologian who, at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the US in the 1960s, practiced street law in East Harlem. He saw death everywhere. “Death,” he wrote, “has countless forms and faces. Death is hidden in everything that happens ... The power of death insinuates itself into every circumstance.”³⁶

But where we might be tempted to judge systems, principalities, and powers as being capable of both good and evil, and quite redeemable if they could only just be reformed here and rebuked there, Stringfellow judged such systems to be irremediably evil. In his view, the powers are unequivocally fallen. While some may be less lethal and corrupting than others, they “all seek their own survival as the highest good, all are complicit therefore in idolatry, all have thus become demonic ... The powers – all of them, without exception – participate in the kingdom of death.”³⁷ In this (Augustinian) schema, there is no politics free from the effects of the Fall and which do not bear the marks of original sin.

³⁴ Murray Rae, “The Unholy Notion of ‘Holy War’: A Christian Critique,” unpublished paper given at the University of Otago, Dunedin, June 2010. For a published version, see Murray Rae, “The Unholy Notion of ‘Holy War’: A Christian Critique,” in *Holy War in the Bible: Christian Morality and the Old Testament Problem*, ed. Heath A. Thomas, Jeremy Evans, and Paul Copan (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2013), 287–311.

³⁵ William D. Apel, “The Dimensions of Death in the Theology of William Stringfellow,” *Foundations* 22, no. 4 (1979): 374. See also Robert B. Slocum, “William Stringfellow and the Christian Witness Against Death,” *Anglican Theological Review* 77, no. 2 (1995): 173–86.

³⁶ William Stringfellow, *Count it All Joy: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Temptation Seen Through the Letter of James* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1999), 91.

³⁷ Walter Wink, “Stringfellow on the Powers,” in *Radical Christian and Exemplary Lawyer: Honoring William Stringfellow*, ed. Andrew W. McThenia, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1995), 18.

But it is not only politics that Stringfellow associates with death's powers. Rather, the entire created order, human and nonhuman, is implicated in death. Every structure, every ideology, every role, every institution, every nation is inescapably part of the power of death as it is manifested in the Fall. Stringfellow calls out the following for special mention – pop idols, fashion, pietism,³⁸ motherhood, religion, race, class, nation, Stalinism, Marxism, Nazism, careerism, illness, denominationalism, the American way of life, war, and violence. He continues:

All institutions, all ideologies, all images, all movements, all causes, all corporations, all bureaucracies, all traditions, all methods and routines, all conglomerates, all races, all nations, all idols. Thus, the Pentagon or the Ford Motor Company or Harvard University or the Hudson Institute or Consolidated Edison or the Diners Club or the Olympics or the Methodist Church or the Teamsters Union are all principalities. So are capitalism, Maoism, humanism, Mormonism, astrology, the Puritan work ethic, science and scientism, white supremacy, patriotism plus many, many more – sports, sex, any profession or discipline, technology, money, the family – beyond any prospect of full enumeration. The principalities and powers are legion.³⁹

Stringfellow sees American cities as infected with death – racism, discrimination, and greed. Those most vulnerable “to death in its crudest forms” are those society designates as outcasts – the elderly, the poor, the non-white, and the foreigner.⁴⁰ Death, he believes, is “militant” in universities, corporations, churches, the labour movement, political institutions, in technology and ideologies, the Pentagon, and the State itself.” Stringfellow judged the twenty-year war in Vietnam to be “the gruesome epitome” of the power of death, and “a symptom of the idolatry of death in America” that would neither be “threatened nor

³⁸ Stringfellow is ruthless about religious pietism as that which honours death under the guise of fidelity to God. See Stringfellow, *Count it All Joy*, 91–93.

³⁹ William Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians and Other Aliens in a Strange Land* (Waco: Word Books, 1973), 78.

⁴⁰ See William Stringfellow, *My People is the Enemy: An Autobiographical Polemic* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1964), 6, 30; Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians*, 69.

diminished.”⁴¹ That is because, in Stringfellow’s judgement, death is “the reigning ‘social purpose’ of American society.”⁴² Were he alive today, whether living in the US or in Australia, he would, I imagine, explicitly name the regimes of incarceration, especially black incarceration, in any such discussion.

Death’s dominion, for Stringfellow, is also, as we shall see, deeply personal. Thus among death’s powers, Stringfellow also names loneliness:

Loneliness is the specific apprehension of a person of his or her own death in relation to the impending death of all persons and all things. Loneliness is the experience in which the fear of one’s own personal death coincides with one’s fright of the death of everyone and everything else. Loneliness is not a unique or an isolated experience; on the contrary, it is the ordinary but still overwhelming anxiety that all relationships are lost. Loneliness does not deny or negate the existence of lives other than the life of the one who is lonely, but loneliness so vividly anticipates the death of such other lives that they are of no sustenance or comfort to the life and being of the one who suffers loneliness.⁴³

Powers and Principalities: Creation Under the Decadence of the Fall

The role that death plays in Stringfellow’s thought is, as already indicated, closely associated with what he wants to say about the ubiquity of the Fall. For Stringfellow, the Fall signifies the breakdown, “rupture and profound disorientation of all relationships within the whole of Creation,”⁴⁴ a breakdown that promotes spoiled and confused identities. We do not know who we are, or why we are. And because of that, Stringfellow argues, “death apparently holds and exercises moral dominion over the whole of Creation.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ William Stringfellow and Anthony Towne, *Suspect Tenderness: The Ethics of the Berrigan Witness* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), 67–68, 74, 112; William Stringfellow, “Election Reflections,” *Christianity and Crisis* 32, no. 20 (1972): 258.

⁴² Gary Commins, “Death and the Circus: The Theology of William Stringfellow,” *Anglican Theological Review* 79, no. 2 (1997): 132.

⁴³ William Stringfellow, *Instead of Death* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 24–25.

⁴⁴ Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians*, 76.

⁴⁵ Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians*, 77. Every creature – which includes institutions and ideologies – shares in death’s confusion and dominion. “The fall means the reign of chaos throughout creation now, so that even that which is ordained by the ruling powers as ‘order’ is, in truth, chaotic. The fall means a remarkable confusion which all beings – principalities as well as persons – suffer as to who they are and why they exist. The fall means the consignment of all created life, and of the realm of time, to

Part of sin's lie is that we humans believe that we ourselves are responsible for the Fall. Such is the pride sin births. But the powers, too – those institutions and systems apart from which we cannot live, for they are a part of God's creative providence – are fallen.⁴⁶ We like to delude ourselves that there are at least some institutions that are viable and truly reformable and even redeemable so that they serve rather than dominate human life. We want to believe that we are capable of doing that work. That, Stringfellow insists, is precisely “the illusion” under which we labour.⁴⁷

Resurrection and the Christian Resistance to Death

Stringfellow's theology rejects any hope of resuscitation. It is, instead, a theology of resurrection: “the good news to the world is that we can stop living in thrall to the powers now, even under the conditions of death. The gospel is that God sets us free from the dread of death, the cajolery of death, and the seductiveness of death, even though we are complicit with death's power.”⁴⁸ Stringfellow really is a theologian of hope – hope born of the resurrection of the dead. He sees in each confrontation between Christ and the powers of death a foreshadowing of the resurrection that “exposes and heralds the overwhelming authority over death which Christ has and holds from the beginning of time to the end of time.”⁴⁹ This is Stringfellow's way of saying that Jesus Christ and not death, or life-after-death, is the last word spoken upon humanity; just as Jesus Christ is also the first word that God speaks upon creation's life.⁵⁰

the power of death.” William Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984), 38.

⁴⁶ Wink, “Stringfellow on the Powers,” 21.

⁴⁷ Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians*, 83: “Americans particularly persevere in belaboring the illusion that at least some institutions are benign and viable and within human direction or can be rendered so by discipline or reform or revolution or displacement. The principalities are, it is supposed, capable of being altered so as to respect and serve human life, instead of demeaning and dominating human life, provided there is a sufficient human will to accomplish this.” See also William Stringfellow, “Harlem, Rebellion, and Resurrection,” *The Christian Century* 87, no. 45 (1970): 1345–48.

⁴⁸ Wink, “Stringfellow on the Powers,” 20.

⁴⁹ William Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2006), 72.

⁵⁰ So Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 22: “Of all the worldly powers, death is the most obvious, but death is not the greatest power active in the world. Death is not the last word. Nor is the last word some nebulous, fanciful, fake promise of an after life. If

For Stringfellow, the reality of death was not only experienced during his time as a civil rights lawyer in Harlem, in the religious hypocrisy he saw in the churches, and in the growing and pervasive militarism that characterised, and still characterises, American society. He also experienced the reign of death in his own body, a body that laboured under the burdens of pancreatitis, diabetes, circulatory problems, stroke, diabetic coma, threats of blindness and amputation, fatigue, and pain. “Dying of malnutrition” – he lost sixty pounds (twenty-seven kilograms) in seven weeks – “I could,” he said, “literally, feel death at work in my body.” “A doctor described his body as a ‘train wreck’; a friend saw in his face a man who had come through a ‘holocaust’.”⁵¹

Stringfellow’s “personal encounter with his own death is a parable of resistance,”⁵² a sign that the resurrection is no empty promise. Clearly, Stringfellow experienced and witnessed death as “at once both a public and a private act: there was (no longer) a dichotomy between the two spheres: the physical death which visits us in our own mortality is in fact at the same time the death whose power and politics maintain the principalities and powers.”⁵³ As he put it: “This lack of distinction between the private and the political realms resolves a secret of the gospel which bothers and bemuses many churchpeople [sic]”;⁵⁴ namely, that Jesus’ demonstrations of authority over the powers of death – seen in his healings and exorcisms, in his commands to wild winds and seas, and in the raising of the dead Lazarus – demonstrate his authority over exactly the same powers that supply “the only moral sanction for the state and its ruling principalities.”⁵⁵ For Stringfellow, pain was a constant reminder of death. Pain, he said, “matured, from an interruption and distraction, into a kind of possession of ... my person”; it became

you have been told or taught anything such as that in church, what you have heard is heresy. The last word is not death, nor life after death; the last word is the same as the first word, and *that* word is Jesus Christ. He has, holds, and exercises power even over death in this world. And his promise is that a person may be set free from bondage to death in this life here and now.”

⁵¹ Cited in Commins, “Death and the Circus,” 133.

⁵² Anthony Dancer, *An Alien in a Strange Land: Theology in the Life of William Stringfellow* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2011), 227.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁵⁴ Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 6.

⁵⁵ Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 8.

“preemptive [sic] ... excluding practically everything and everyone else from its victim’s intelligence or consideration.”⁵⁶ And again:

The therapy failed and I became possessed by pain ... My experience of pain ... was a pervasive, totalitarian presence, a foreigner to life in our midst which could not be ignored ... To endure pain is to suffer anticipation of death, in both mind and body. The experience of pain is a foretaste of the event of death. Pain is an ambassador of death. Pain is one of death’s disguises, though not one of the more subtle ones. It is the surrogate, really, servant relationship evident between pain and death which causes me to write of pain in such personified terms ... Pain threatened to become both occupation and preoccupation. By the time that I was no longer able to work in any ordinary sense and was seeking small diversions in the Sears catalog [sic] or by baking bread, I began to realize that, in truth *pain had become my work*.⁵⁷

And as he neared the end of his own life at the age of 56, he said: “I resist the power of death and that which, in the somewhat pathetic state of my health, manifestly foreshadows death – like amputation of a leg or two.”⁵⁸ By so doing, Stringfellow was seeking to bear witness to the death of one who, in approaching his own death, bore the full brunt of death’s condemnation voiced through the power of the mob, and through the power of empire, and through the power of the religious establishments with which it was in partnership, exposing and stripping bare all other claims to legitimacy and veracity.

Stringfellow believed that Christ in his death and resurrection encounters and exhausts the principalities and powers of death itself, bearing the fullness of their hostility in his own body. Jesus, Stringfellow says, “submits to their condemnation, he accepts their committal of himself to death and in his resurrection he ends their power and the power they represent ... In Christ the false lords of history, the principalities, are shown to be false; at the same time, in Christ the true

⁵⁶ William Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday: A Personal Confrontation with Illness, Pain, and Death* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 20; Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality*, 88.

⁵⁷ Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 45, 53, 55. Italics in original. See Dancer, *An Alien in a Strange Land*, 227–34.

⁵⁸ Stringfellow, *The Politics of Spirituality*, 88.

Lord of history is made known.”⁵⁹ In this way, as another has put it, “the Easter history is the clue to all history.”⁶⁰

But how are we to live in, to participate in, and to witness to, that history? This is a pressing question for Stringfellow precisely because Christ’s victory over the powers of death is a victory Christ wins “not for himself,” or for God, “but for us.” Thus if Christ’s power over death is to be meaningful and “effective, not just at the terminal point of a [person’s] life, but throughout [their] life, during this life in this world, right now” – if Christ’s “resurrection means the possibility of living in this life, in the very midst of death’s works, safe and free from death”⁶¹ – then this will have to find some concrete forms.

Living Humanly in the Midst of Death

In 1962, Stringfellow was approached by the Christian Education Department of the Executive Council of the Episcopal Church to write a book for high school students. The outcome was titled *Instead of the death* wherein Stringfellow recalls his own journeys alongside death – his own unremitting pain and sickness, his own dealings with deathly institutions, authorities, agencies, and bureaucracies with which he engaged as a lawyer and citizen, and the ways in which the community of East Harlem helped him to identity the relentless and ruthless structures, procedures, and regimes that dehumanise, and that are as militant and as morally real as is that death which visits us in our illnesses and fractured relationships.

On another occasion, Stringfellow called upon those seeking to renounce the worship of death to live humanly in the midst of death, in resistance to death. This, he suggested, is done “by denying death’s ultimate power while at the same time taking death seriously.”⁶² So, while exhausted and wrung by pain, struggling to either speak or stand, and yet somehow enlivened by the occasion itself, Stringfellow, in a powerful voice, unbroken and clear and full of hope, offered the following benediction to a congregation:

⁵⁹ Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 73.

⁶⁰ Timothy J. Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 187.

⁶¹ Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 72.

⁶² Apel, “The Dimensions of Death,” 374.

Remember now, that the state has only one power it can use against human beings: death. The state can persecute you, prosecute you, imprison you, exile you, execute you. All of these mean the same thing. The state can consign you to death. The grace of Jesus Christ in this life is that death fails. There is nothing the state can do to you or to me, which we need fear.⁶³

Stringfellow spoke too about what he calls “biblical spirituality,” which, in his mind, means “living in the midst of the era of the Fall, wherein *all* relationships whatsoever have been lost or damaged or diminished or twisted or broken, in a way which is open to transcendence of the fallenness of each and every relationship and in which these very relationships are recovered or rendered new.”⁶⁴ Biblical spirituality calls for prophetic discernment, painstaking attention to discerning the Word at work in creation and to, in Wink’s words, “transfiguring common history, while remaining radically realistic about death’s vitality in all that happens.”⁶⁵ So Stringfellow: “The discernment of spirits refers to the talent to recognize the Word of God in this world in principalities and persons despite the distortion of fallenness ... [It means] transcending the moral reality of death permeating everything. This is the gift which exposes and rebukes idolatry. This is the gift which confounds and undoes blasphemy.”⁶⁶ In Stringfellow’s view, locking horns in particular and perpetual struggle against death’s rule is what makes us – or exposes us as – most human. “Resistance to death,” he writes, “is the only way to live humanly in the midst of the Fall.”⁶⁷

The summons by the Word of the Resurrected God is a summons to be for or against life.⁶⁸ Those who welcome this summons are thrown

⁶³ Stringfellow, *A Second Birthday*, 133.

⁶⁴ Stringfellow and Towne, *Suspect Tenderness*, 20.

⁶⁵ Wink, “Stringfellow on the Powers,” 22.

⁶⁶ Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians*, 139. And again: “Biblical living is watchful for that consummation but does not strive to undo the power of death, knowing that death is already undone [in the resurrection] and is in no way whatever to be feared and worshiped.” *Ibid.*, 153.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁶⁸ It is also a summons from which none are exempt: “Death does not wait for full maturity and adulthood, for infirmity or age, for sickness or weakness to assail human life. The work of death begins at the very moment of birth: death claims every person on the first consciousness of existence. Death does not respect or wait upon the foolish amenities which cause people to hide from their offspring the truth that, for all the ingenuity and capability of human beings, death is present, powerful, and active in

into situations in which their decisions and actions in relation to other creatures are made and exercised inescapably “in the very midst of the conflict, distortion, alienation, disorientation, chaos, [and] decadence of the Fall,” where the “principalities and powers” are at work.⁶⁹ One implication of this, for Christians, is that they can never be certain that they are following God’s will, or even know what that will is. Neither must they ever try to second-guess God’s judgement on matters. Instead, they look to Christ alone to make such judgements.

In the midst of Christendom and its violence, racism,⁷⁰ and unbridled economic injustice, Stringfellow looks for God who manifests God’s self amidst a community who:

Persevere in embracing human life as the gift that it is, and insist, both in adversity and triumph, upon living humanly together. If the triumphs seem few or subtle or mysterious while the adversities are frequent and blunt and redundant, it is the transcendence of life over death here and now – in other words, the power of the resurrection – that is, in any case, the singular humanizing fact.⁷¹

Biblical spirituality also means freedom – freedom *from* and freedom *for*. Freedom *from* idolatrous dead ends such as religious piety and the temptations of worldly power; and freedom *for* obedience – for, in Stringfellow’s words, living “during the remaining time of death’s apparent reign, without escaping or hiding or withdrawing from the full reality of death’s presence, bearing the brunt of its powers, yet jubilantly confident at the same time of Christ’s victory over death and all the powers of death.”⁷²

Resurrection, says Stringfellow, is not about life after death. Resurrection is about life amidst and in the face of death. Resurrection is “the transcendence of the power of death, here and now, in this life, in

every moment, in every event and transaction of human experience. No one is given birth who does not imminently confront the claim of death over his life.” Stringfellow, *Instead of Death*, 20–21.

⁶⁹ Stringfellow, *An Ethic for Christians*, 55.

⁷⁰ See Jason A. Goroncy, “Race and Christianity in Australia,” *Post-Christendom Studies* 4 (2019–2020): 25–74.

⁷¹ William Stringfellow, “Chambers Memorial,” in *A Keeper of the Word: Selected Writings of William Stringfellow*, ed. Bill Wylie Kellermann (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 142–43.

⁷² Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 75.

this world.”⁷³ Resurrection means overcoming bondage to death and its myriad principalities and powers that keep the world enslaved and in fear, and which dehumanize and steal the joyous freedom of God’s creatures. This calls for resistance. So Stringfellow: “It is the freedom to live anywhere, any day, in such a way as to expose and confound the works of death and at the same time to declare and honour the work of Christ.”⁷⁴ This freedom – to live *in* but not *of* the world, and to do that *not for God’s sake but wholly for the sake of the world itself* – is the gift that God bestows upon the friends of Jesus. “The Body of Christ receives this freedom for the sake of the rest of the world which still suffers the bondage and agony of death.”⁷⁵

But what does such freedom, such resurrection, look like in practice? Stringfellow once described Philip Berrigan being in jail as an icon of resurrection. Berrigan was a peace activist and former Roman Catholic priest who spent eleven years of his life incarcerated by the state as a result of his commitment to nonviolent civil disobedience in the causes of peace and of nuclear disarmament, and those against social inequalities, greed, and police brutality. Stringfellow tells the story too about a New York City youth worker by the name of Lou Marsh who, in 1963, was beaten to death by gang members after he had tried to stop a fight between two rival gangs. As Stringfellow describes it, Marsh’s time working with violent youth saw him undergo something like a conversion from struggling with self-hatred to experiencing the unconditional and risky love of God. Stringfellow writes: “Lou Marsh, when he died, was ready; that is, he had already died in Christ and was without fear of death. That is the freedom the Resurrection bestows upon [us].”⁷⁶

A further image, itself a corporate image, that Stringfellow likes to play with as a kind of parable of the freedom of discipleship in resurrection is that of the circus. He recognises in the circus the kind of hope, riskiness, and apparent carelessness that ought to characterise the Christian community. “In the circus,” he says, “humans are represented as freed from consignment to death”:

⁷³ William Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith: My Experience in Mourning* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 138.

⁷⁴ Stringfellow, *Free in Obedience*, 75–76.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁷⁶ Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 147.

There one person walks on a wire fifty feet above the ground, another stands upside down on a forefinger, another juggles a dozen incongruous objects simultaneously, another hangs in the air by the heels, one upholds twelve in a human pyramid, another is shot from a cannon. The circus performer is the image of the eschatological person – emancipated from frailty and inhibition, exhilarant, transcendent over death – neither confined nor conformed by the fear of death any more.

The eschatological parable is, at the same time, a parody of conventional society in the world as it is. In a multitude of ways in circus life the risk of death is bluntly confronted and the power of death exposed and, as the ringmaster heralds, defied ...

So the circus, in its open ridicule of death ... shows the rest of us that the only enemy in life is death and that this enemy confronts everyone, whatever the circumstances, all the time.⁷⁷

For Stringfellow, the circus presents itself in dialectical opposition to death, it ridicules death in a very public way, and in doing so exposes death as “the single real and constant enemy of life.”⁷⁸

The service the circus does – more so, I regret to say, than the churches do – is to portray openly, dramatically, and humanly that death in the midst of life. The circus is eschatological parable and social parody: it signals a transcendence of the power of death, which exposes this world as it truly is while it pioneers the Kingdom.⁷⁹

Implications: Life in a Promise

So how do we live humanly in the midst of death? Barth, Wink, and Stringfellow remind us that the gospel holds out the invitation to live as if death and its associated powers, while certain, are penultimate realities. The gospel is the invitation to live in Christ, for whom death is not foreign territory and in whom death is confronted with a new boundary in the living God who is love. It holds out the promise of

⁷⁷ Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 89–91.

⁷⁸ Dancer, *An Alien in a Strange Land*, 226.

⁷⁹ Stringfellow, *A Simplicity of Faith*, 91. To be sure, Stringfellow is operating here with a somewhat romantic image of the circus, one which ignores “its negative sides – the abuse of ‘freaks’, the mistreatment of animals, the shadow side of clowning – with a charity he never allowed the church.” Gary Commins, “Harlem and Eschaton: Stringfellow’s Theological Homes,” in *Prophet of Justice, Prophet of Life: Essays on William Stringfellow*, ed. Robert Boak Slocum (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2014), 146n37.

resurrection – that is, the promise of God’s “kicking at the darkness until it bleeds daylight.”⁸⁰ Resurrection is what it looks like for love to stop at nothing, and to *not* stop at nothing. “Whoever does not love abides in death” (1 Jn 3.14).

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⁸⁰ Brian J. Walsh, *Kicking at the Darkness: Bruce Cockburn and the Christian Imagination* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2011) 39.

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