

## A Spiritual Foundation for Social Action

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May 14, 2006

### **Reading** from *God's Politics* by Jim Wallis

Why can't we talk about religion and politics? These are the two topics you are not supposed to discuss in polite company. Don't break up the dinner party by bringing up either of these subjects! That's the conventional wisdom. Why? Perhaps these topics are too important, too potentially divisive, or raise the issues of core values and ultimate concerns that make us uncomfortable.

*Sojourners* magazine, where I serve as editor, commits the offense, in every single issue, of talking about faith, politics, and culture. Yet our subscriber and on-line lists are growing, especially among a younger generation . . . I hear and feel the hunger for a fuller, deeper, and richer conversation about religion in public life, about faith and politics. It's a discussion that we don't always hear in America today. Sometimes the most strident and narrow voices are the loudest, while more progressive, prophetic, and healing faith often gets missed. But the good news is about how all that is changing – really changing.

Abraham Lincoln had it right. Our task should not be to invoke religion and the name of God by claiming God's blessing and endorsement for all our national policies and practices – saying, in effect, that God is on our side. Rather, Lincoln said, we should pray and worry earnestly whether we are on God's side.

Those are the two ways that religion has been brought into public life in American history. The first way – God on our side – leads inevitably to triumphalism, self-righteousness, bad theology, and, often, dangerous foreign policy. The second way – asking if we are on God's side – leads to much healthier things, namely, penitence and even repentance, humility, reflection, and even accountability. We need much more of all these, because these are often the missing values of politics.

Of course, Martin Luther King Jr. did it best. With his Bible in one hand and the Constitution in the other, King persuaded, not just pronounced. He reminded us all of God's purposes for justice, for peace, and for the "beloved community" where those always left out and behind get a front-row seat. And he did it – bringing religion into public life – in a way that was always welcoming, inclusive, and inviting to all who cared about moral, spiritual, or religious values. Nobody felt left out of the conversation.

### **Sermon**

The title I've given to this sermon is "A Spiritual Foundation for Social Action." What it's really about – as suggested by our reading earlier – is religion and politics. What is social action, after all, but active participation in the political process? And as people of faith - as members of a religious organization - we are faced with figuring out what is the connection between our faith, our religion, our spirituality, and our efforts in political social action.

There are some compelling reasons why some of us may shy away from the mixing of religion and politics. Foremost among these is the notion of the separation of church and state, which most of us embrace vigorously. However, separation of church and state is not the same thing as separation of church and politics. While we recognize the dangers of churches becoming enmeshed in the workings of government, or in particular political parties, the fact is that most, if not all, political issues have a religious or spiritual dimension. As such it is

appropriate that religious folks should have something to say about them.

Another reason for hesitation, though, is that some religious people and groups have given a bad name to the mixing of religion and politics. Many of us have been horrified at the power wielded by the Religious Right in this country, in the political process, and even within the government itself. As they advocate policies that erode our freedoms, and seem to be trying to define the “right” religious path for our nation, we cringe and deepen our resolve to keep religion out of the process.

But there is another way. Rather than try to remove religious and spiritual values from the political equation, we might work to insure that there is a balance of such values. That progressive, liberal religious values find their place in the conversation. We can call attention to the fallacy that the voice of the Religious Right is the voice of religion. We are religious too, and our voices must also be heard.

I spent part of my recent Sabbatical Leave exploring these issues of religion and politics, and particularly of giving voice to progressive spiritual values. One of the more exciting experiences along the way was a large conference in Washington, DC, called “Spirituality and Politics: Seeking a Public Integrity.” The conference was convened by Jim Wallis, editor of *Sojourners* magazine and author of *God’s Politics*, and Richard Rohr, a Franciscan brother who runs the Center for Action and Contemplation in New Mexico. Both have worked for many years to bring progressive spiritual values into the national political dialogue. And nearly 1700 people from around the country gathered to share their vision of spiritual integrity and social justice, and to seek the inspiration and energy to work for their realization.

I’d like to share some of the insights that came out of that conference. Then I’ll summarize some of what Jim Wallis has shared through his book. And then we’ll take a look at where that leaves us.

First, one thing that Richard Rohr pointed out was that spiritual experience and politics have always been linked. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, it goes all the way back to Moses and his encounter with God, continues through the Old Testament prophets, through the ethical teachings of Jesus, all the way up to Martin Luther King Jr. and beyond. Rohr suggested that politics is what you do publicly, while spirituality is why you do it personally. That is, your spirituality gives you the foundation for what you do politically.

Another important insight had to do with depth. One of the speakers suggested that we should focus not on moving to the right or to the left, but rather on moving deeper. That means going beyond ideology, of the right or the left, which the speaker characterized as conclusions without the journey. That is, easy, pat answers that have not been forged in the fires of deep experience and reflection. Ideology is a shallow and weak foundation for a life of spiritual and political integrity.

A particularly important insight offered by Jim Wallis was based on his observation that Martin Luther King, Jr. did not endorse candidates. Rather he asked them to endorse his agenda. That points to the truth that it is the issues that are key, not the political personalities involved. What Wallis believes is that what we need to do is change the wind – not just replace wet-fingered politicians. Change the wind, and the politicians will follow.

There is no doubt that social movements with spiritual foundations can change history. It has happened before and it can happen again. One key to success is to let go of the old choice of belief vs. secularism, and understand that the real choice is between hope and fear or cynicism. I’ll talk more about that set of choices in a couple of weeks. For right now, just let me say that hope is a choice, not a state of mind. We must choose hope. And agreeing about issues is not

enough. We need to act out of hope. And it is clear to me that maintaining and acting out of hope in these times requires spiritual resources of the first order.

So that is a small sampling of what I gleaned from the Washington conference. Now let me tell you a little more about Jim Wallis's approach as laid out in his book, *God's Politics*. First, I think Wallis is also author of the bumper sticker you may have seen during the 2004 campaign: "God is Not a Republican. Or a Democrat." In contrast to the Religious Right, which claims that God takes sides in political elections, Wallis again separates out the issues from the personalities. He believes that all candidates should be examined by measuring their policies against the complete range of religious ethics and values.

Wallis identifies himself as an Evangelical Christian, and his analyses of the issues are strongly biblically-based, but not in the narrow, selective way that some mine the scriptures for obscure, out-of-context condemnations of this behavior or that. Wallis is more of a spirit rather than letter of the law kind of guy, and I'm with him on that. He seems to identify particularly with the Old Testament prophets who continually called the powers that be to account for straying from important fundamental values. That being said, here are a few of what he believes are important political *and* religious issues, and some of the key questions that need to be asked.

- Poverty: caring for the poor and vulnerable. Do budget and tax policies reward the rich or show compassion for poor families? Do foreign policies include fair trade and debt cancellation for the poorest countries?
- The environment: caring for God's earth. Do policies protect the creation or serve corporate interests that damage it?
- War, and our call to be peacemakers. Do policies pursue "wars of choice" or respect international law and cooperation in responding to real global threats?
- Human rights: respecting the image of God in every person. How can we change the attitudes and policies that lead to the abuse and torture of Iraqi prisoners?

Those are at the top of Wallis's list of important issues, and I believe rightly so. He sums up by saying that candidates for public office should be measured by "whether they enhance human life, human dignity, and human rights; whether they strengthen family life and protect children; whether they promote racial reconciliation and support gender equality; whether they serve peace and social justice; and whether they advance the common good rather than only individual, national, and special interests." I hope we will all keep that in mind on Tuesday as we go to the polls to vote.

I suspect that many of the issues that concern Jim Wallis the most also resonate with most of us. However, I also suspect that most of us would not refer to the Bible if asked for the primary source of our interest and concern. If I am correct, then we are left with the question of what are our primary sources of motivation with respect to social action.

One possible answer is "our Unitarian Universalist principles," and another is "guidance from liberal religious leaders." Take, for example, one of the hottest, most current political issues of the day: immigration reform. William G. Sinkford, president of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) has issued a statement grounded in the Association's commitment to immigrant rights and justice and equality for all persons. His statement is tied directly to four of our seven principles: The inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion in human relations; the goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all; and respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Over ten years ago, the UUA took a stand for the humane treatment of immigrants, reading in part: “Because we covenant . . . to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of every person . . . and to promote justice, equity, and compassion in human relations . . . we cannot in good conscience condone the systematic refusal of humane social services to needy persons and their families based on immigration status, national origin, or citizenship.”

Sinkford says, in his more recent statement: “There are no easy answers, but the religious community is called to stand in solidarity with the oppressed. . . We are also called to acknowledge that racism has blinded most Americans to what takes place in our own kitchens, workshops, and fields. For our nation to be whole, we must acknowledge that our lives of privilege are supported in thousands of ways by people whose labor is invisible and whose suffering is hidden.”

Now, in pointing to our principles and our leaders as part of our spiritual foundation and inspiration, I must clarify. I don’t believe we take a particular position, or particular actions, because our principles or our leaders tell us we should. I think we do so because our own deepest values and convictions call on us to do so. Our principles and our leaders are expressing values that we already embrace. Their reminders of those shared values may indeed inspire us and spur us on, but ultimately our spiritual foundation lies within us in the form of those core values that we have developed based on our own life experience and reflection.

I would say that our stated principles are more prescriptive than descriptive when it comes to our behavior. But when it comes to our espoused beliefs and values, it is the reverse. Those principles are descriptive of the values we already hold. That’s why the principles resonate with us, why we appeal to them as part of our rationale for our positions on issues.

So if you want to have a strong spiritual foundation for your positions and actions for social justice, then you must look deeply within yourself to discern what spiritual values provide your deepest motivations. And if you determine that those are things like love, compassion, justice, a vision of what can be, or a sense of unity and interconnectedness, then you must further discern what course of action can best bring those values to life.

One of the frustrations of social justice work, which makes a strong spiritual foundation so important, is that there always seems to be more to do than we can possibly hope to do. That’s one of the reasons I talked so much about Jim Wallis, the progressive evangelical Christian. He is our friend, agreeing with most of us on nearly every social issue. And as he himself says, “Religion should be not a wedge to divide us, but a bridge to unite us.” When we are united in our visions of justice, even if those visions arise in different ways from different sources, we must join hands and work together for a better world.

I leave you with a few final words of hope, with which Wallis ends his book. He writes of a young African American activist named Lisa Sullivan. Lisa did community organizing with urban youth in Washington, DC. Tragically, Lisa died suddenly at the age of forty of a rare heart ailment. Wallis writes of her:

Lisa’s legacy is continuing through countless young people whom she inspired, challenged, and mentored. But there is one thing she often said to them and to all of us that has stayed with me since Lisa died. When people would complain, as they often do, that we don’t have any leaders today or would ask where the Martin Luther Kings are now, Lisa would get angry. “We are the ones we have been waiting for!” she would declare. Lisa was a person of faith. And hers was a powerful call to leadership and

responsibility and a deep affirmation of hope.

Lisa's words are . . . a commission that can only be fulfilled by very human beings, but people who, because of faith and hope, believe that the world can be changed. And it is that very belief that changes the world. And if not us, who will believe? After all, we are the ones we have been waiting for.

So may it be.