

God, politics and American way

What is the best title of a recent book?

My candidate: "God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It" the best seller written by Jim Wallis, a Washington based Christian minister.

Why is the title so good? Of course, anything that hints of mixing religion and politics gets our attention these days. Either of these topics can evoke strong feelings in many of us and the mixture compounds their powerful hold on us.



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But this title has more. It seems to slam both the political right and the left. "The right is wrong," the title implies. That message rings with political liberals.

"The left doesn't get it," confirms the feelings of many conservatives. Amazingly then, "God's Politics" title draws in both the political right and the left. They all want someone to slam their "wrongheaded" opposites.

The title seems to imply that the author, Jim Wallis, may give us a balanced critique of both sides of the American political divide from an impartial religious perspective, and then give his readers guidance about how to determine what God would have us do in political matters.

This is exactly what Wallis tries to do.

His point says "The best public contribution of religion is precisely not to be ideologically predictable nor a loyal partisan. To always raise the moral issues of human rights, for example, will challenge both left and right wing governments who put power above principles. Religious action is rooted in a much deeper place than 'rights'-that being the image of God in every human being."

He is critical of the political Right which "has hijacked the language of faith to prop up its political agenda — an agenda not all people of faith support."

Wallis writes, "The religious and political Right gets the public meaning of religion mostly wrong—preferring to focus only on sexual and cultural issues while ignoring the weightier matters of justice."

"And," he writes, "secular Left doesn't seem to get the meaning and promise of faith for politics at all—mistakenly dismissing spirituality as irrelevant to social change."

In material promoting the book Wallis's views are summarized this way, "The Left hasn't done much better, largely ignoring faith and continually separating moral discourse and personal ethics from public policy. While the Right argues that God's way is their way, the Left pursues an unrealistic separation of religious values from morally grounded political leadership. The consequence is a false choice between ideological religion and soulless politics."

The book's promotional material asks these questions, "Since when did believing in God and having moral values make you pro-war, pro-rich, and pro-Republican? And since when did promoting and pursuing a progressive social agenda with a concern for economic security, health care, and educational opportunity mean you had to put faith in God aside?"

Wallis urges all Christians to turn to scriptures to seek God's directions for our political efforts. Wallis is an evangelical Christian minister. So it should be no surprise that his understanding of the scriptures have led him to take strong "pro-life" and "pro-family" political positions.

But he finds in the words of the Old Testament prophets and the words of Jesus clear directions to work for peace and justice for the poor and oppressed. Wallis's criticism of the war in Iraq and the current administration's positions on poverty might surprise those who think Evangelical Christians are all automatically political conservatives.

Wallis not only surprises. He also dismays conservative groups, one of which accused him and his ministry of "reading scripture through the lens of leftwing politics."

Wallis would, no doubt, reject this criticism, asserting that some of scripture's commands are unambiguous, whatever lens is used.

Even though he has become a sought after advisor for Democrats, he pleads for religious people to resist being forced into one political camp or another. "In a political and media culture that squeezes everything into only two options of left and right, religious people must refuse the ideological categorization and actually build bridges between people of good will in both liberal and conservative camps."

On that note, religious people of all political persuasions should agree with Wallis.

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Going back to Gary for Covenant with black America

The forum that was recently held in Houston by Tavis Smiley, communications impresario, on "The State of the Black Union" was important not only because this was the seventh such event, but because it was the site where a book — "The Covenant" — was launched.



RON
WALTERS

The Covenant contains a vital set of recommendations for black people to pursue in 10 different areas. And, although I will not attempt to describe them here, suffice it to say that they make an enormous contribution to the agenda-building process so necessary for leadership that will make a difference.

I suggested that agenda-building was a process and in that respect, the upcoming Gary Convention is also designed to be part of that process. It will produce an agenda that emphasizes the economic problems of the black community and potential solutions to them as well. This is the primary difference from the State of the Black Union conference. In fact, many of the fine recommendations taken up in the economic panel of the Houston meeting will also set the stage for discussion by the economic forum at Gary, attempting to refine, elaborate and build upon the ideas presented.

Never before has a convention of non-specialists in the black community primarily set its sights on economic problems. Most of the past conventions that have been expected to create a leadership agenda and the momentum to get them enacted have been political in nature and these have produced a wide set of issues with not a great deal of depth.

The Gary convention provides an opportunity for the participants to go into some depth on a series of economic issues affecting the black community, such as: poverty correctives, Katrina reconstruction, economic literacy in home ownership, taxes, money management, investment, debt avoidance, labor rights, business development, the role of Blacks corporate executives, health care economics, urban inner-city economics, affirmative action in employment and contracting, social security, fair wages and globalization.

Most of these issues were addressed in Houston, but the Gary convention will undoubtedly contribute to the momentum of The Covenant and the objective of attempting to create a force of leverage that will surface them in the political system.

In addition, the direction of The Covenant that emphasizes individual and community responsibility is consistent with that of the Gary Convention. As a participant in shaping the original Gary Convention, I remember our discussion about who or what was the target of our agenda. We decided that we must begin with the black community first, so much of the original Gary Agenda document is addressed to what the black community must do to expand the range of opportunity and freedom. That is still an imperative today.

To some extent, the debate that arose in Houston about whether to make a Covenant with America or with the black community is a false choice as long as we live in America, under its legal framework, are part of its employment base, consume its good and pay taxes. That leads to something I discovered in the 1960s in the midst of similar discussion about whether to go "outside the system" with our politics. Thinking hard about it, I concluded that there was no "outside the system," that as long as we were within the system, we were within its reach and therefore, we had to struggle here and create our space within it. So, the Covenant has to be with American public policy and with black community empowerment, what is important are the terms of each agreement.

These agendas are addressed to setting out the terms of our Covenant with America and with the black community, that is why they are important. Over the past 34 years since the Gary Convention, many of the terms set forth in that agenda have been achieved in the progress we have made in many fields. For much of that progress, we have to recognize the steadfastness of our leadership in fighting to uphold the legal covenants made in the 1960s.

The Covenant with America has been far less productive, since it has gone backward on many of the promises held out in those covenants. Consequently, we need to make a new assessment of the terms of a Covenant and that is why there cannot be too many contributions to arrive as a substantive, effective and forceful agenda.

Finally, while I believe in agenda setting, I have come to believe that what happens at the back end of the process is more important than the production it takes to launch an Agenda. The test is to make it live and that will require unity and struggle by as many who under the task and will commit themselves to it.

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OUR VOICES

Next generation of leadership

People often ask me where the next generation of leaders will come from. I know they will be young men and women like Westenley Alcenat.

Wes' fellow students at his Minneapolis high school call him the "kid who always smiles." But the constant optimism and infectious smile he shows now as a teenager weren't always there in the little boy who "grew accustomed to seeing dead bodies, and hearing rapes from the neighbor's door."

Wes was one of four extraordinary high school students recently honored at the Children's Defense Fund Minnesota's Beat the Odds celebration. Beat the Odds was initiated by CDF in 1990 to celebrate the positive potential of young people like Wes who are succeeding and doing well in school despite having to overcome enormous obstacles. He grew up in Haiti, where violence and political instability turned playgrounds into battlefields and his childhood into a series of unimaginable horrors.

As he says, "I was part of a cycle in which the future seemed grim and hopeless. I witnessed the darkest conditions of poverty, where projects are made of shacks and mud huts; where dreams are nonexistent, a place where hope lies dead and buried by political unrest."

Wes had every reason to feel hopeless. When he was six, soldiers killed his parents. His grandparents then cared for him, but when they and the rest of his family had to flee the country, Wes was left behind with distant relatives to wait for a visa clearance for what turned out to be four long years. Often lonely and alone, he even survived attempts on his life. During those four years, he cried every day.

But when Wes was finally cleared to enter the United States and be reunited with his grandparents and other family members, his life took a new turn. He didn't speak English when he arrived and had had very little formal education in Haiti. But thanks to the support of teachers, mentors, and his devoted grandparents, he now takes rigorous courses in high school, maintains a 3.2 GPA, and counts writers like Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and W.E.B. DuBois among his heroes.

He also writes poetry as a way of expressing his feelings about his past and his hopes for the future. He volunteers at local hospitals and schools working with immigrant and inner-city children, and his dream is to pursue a career in health care and return to Haiti or travel to Africa to continue helping other young people who have not yet received the second chance he was given.

In his speech after winning the Beat the Odds award, Wes said, "It has always been said that children are the future of our world. But the very ignorance of our world is the cause of their misery. I stand before you not as the sole recipient but as the ambassador of millions of others like me; some living in Haiti, in Africa, in Asia, in South America, and in the United States."

I am standing before you as the living metaphor, a reminder of kids that grow up in war zones, of kids that grow up without childhoods; of kids in need of a home, a father or mother; and of kids without futures, unless those of us who have the power to change their lives are willing to take action."

Westenley Alcenat is already standing up, taking action and making a difference. He has already had a lifetime's worth of difficult experiences and lessons, but they have given him wisdom, maturity, and the determination to turn a terrible past into a positive future.

Too often we hear about teenagers getting into trouble, dropping out of school, becoming involved with drugs, crime, gangs or becoming parents too soon. But we rarely recognize the many young people who do well despite serious obstacles that can stand in the way of even the smallest achievements.

We need to celebrate and support the young people in our communities who are beating the odds every day, and look all around us for bright, inspiring role models like Westenley.

More importantly, we must transform a world that places daunting obstacles in the way of millions of children.

MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN is president and founder of the Children's Defense Fund.

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