The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post–Religious Right America

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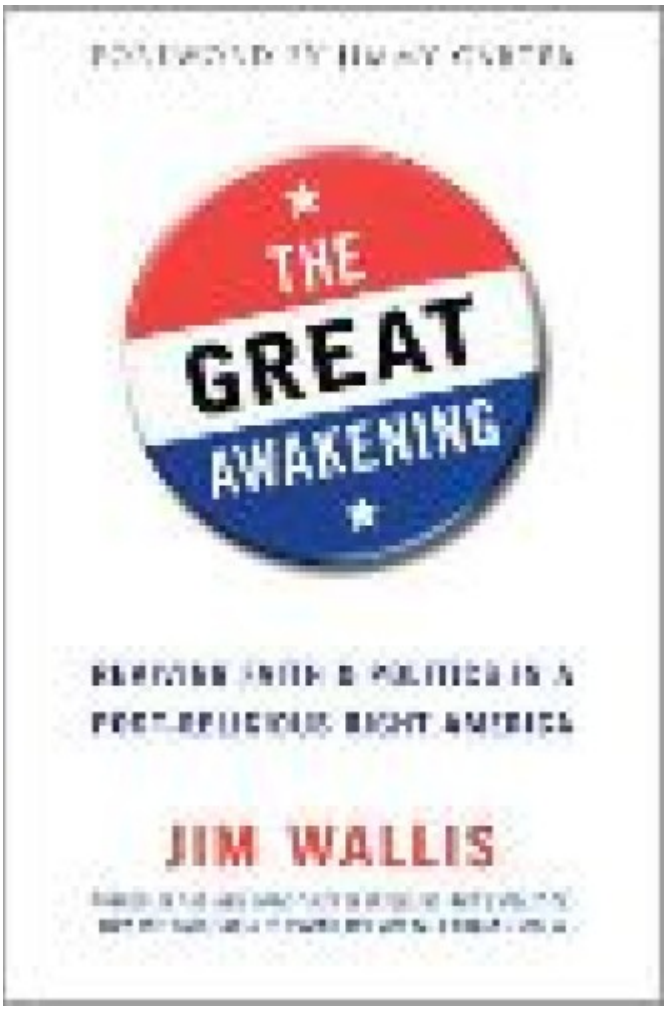
In Review



The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post–Religious Right America

Jim Wallis

HarperOne

In the early 1990s, I passed an evening in the home of a young couple in Northern Ireland in which we traded cultural references. During our spirited exchange on the thinkers, music and film that had formed our understanding of life and how to live it, we discovered that we had the Bruces Springsteen and Cockburn in common, and Bob Dylan permeated everything. To their amazement, I noted that I'd only found my way to Martin Luther King Jr. thanks to Ireland's own U2. They liked REM's "Man on the Moon" but were completely unaware of the oddly prophetic witness of the song's protagonist, Andy Kaufman. I shared my knowledge proudly and at length. As the back-and-forth continued, the husband made his way over to a bookshelf and returned with a knowing smile. He handed me a book by a hero of his whom he was sure I knew all about. I stared at Jim Wallis's face on the back cover and resisted the temptation to feign a familiar nod. I'd never heard of him.

They could hardly believe it. And the conversation that ensued shed light on their use of a word they often employed in a way I'd found strange: *evangelical*. In their estimation, the word couldn't possibly refer primarily to Republican Party politics in the U.S., and if it was to be rightly affixed to any American political figure, that figure would have to be the one most closely associated with the obviously evangelical work of Habitat for Humanity: Jimmy Carter. Wallis, they explained, was a man who went around to churches with the flimsy remains of a Bible from which he'd excised all references to the poor. "This is the Bible you're preaching from!" Wallis would intone, explaining that the gospel was always good news (*evangel*) for the poor or it wasn't Jesus' gospel.

This was the 19th-century evangelicalism associated with the likes of William Wilberforce, the Bible study that became the YMCA and the Christian feminism of the Grimké sisters. Wallis refused to surrender the term *evangelical* to anyone who would reduce Jesus' cosmically redemptive politics to a personal, privatized relationship with a still, small apolitical voice inside their heads. I decided I liked Jim Wallis.

In recent years, Wallis has become a fixture of popular discourse, whether he is moderating debates, conversing with Jon Stewart or being squeezed between angry interest groups on *Meet the Press*. His determined hold on the meaning of evangelical witness—his refusal to allow it to be reduced to the brand of a Falwellian sleeper cell within the Republican Party—seems to have outlasted its detractors. By

Wallis's lights, the monologue of the religious right on the American social scene has come to an end, and the emergence of "Red Letter Christians" whose lively witness will fit "in no party's pocket" is under way. In *The Great Awakening* Wallis offers a lengthy field report of what he is seeing and sensing, of the intelligence he's gathering as he carries his witness around the world.

Between meetings at the 2007 World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Wallis discussed with U2's Bono his vision of justice revivals that will entail "clear social commitments" and "decidedly social consequences." Bono mulled over the idea for a moment then recited, off the top of his head, Jesus' variation of Isaiah, "'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.' . . . That's what you have to preach!" Describing the vibe of this conversation and many others, Wallis insists that the days when "religious concerns" were thought to be irrelevant to visions of global justice are over and that the good news of God's kingdom is breaking down all manner of divisions. It is by faith, he argues, that "the great mountains of greed, injustice, and indifference are to be moved."

As Wallis reports it, the biblical witness is becoming paradoxically self-evident for many people, whether they have been in what is understood to be the center of global leadership or are on the margins. Wallis reports a conversation with Major General Tim Cross, the most senior British officer involved in postwar planning in Iraq: over coffee with Wallis after hearing him speak, Cross said that "Micah is right and Rumsfeld is wrong." In the parting words of Kofi Annan and Tony Blair, Wallis detects resonance with the Hebrew prophets. Such kingdom-colored realizations have also been uttered by Bill Gates, Hillary Clinton and E. J. Dionne.

But the grandness of the good news vision and its economic implications (international, environmental and political as well as personal) won't be confined by the proprietary claims of any quarter, and the people who best bear witness to it are those who understand that they can't possibly own its copyright, including a wide range of ostensibly non-Christian figures from whom Wallis derives hope. He also senses a new humility emerging among church leaders who are noting the rise of a "postwhite" American church. When he had an exchange with Bill Hybels of the Willow Creek Association, Wallis was moved by the sobering and earthbound candor with which Hybels described himself as a "white man who still doesn't get it but is trying to."

Wallis wants to link the tradition of Billy Graham with the witness of Martin Luther King Jr., and he models such a hope in his determination to pursue dialogue with anyone who'll talk to him. When he met with leaders of Focus on the Family in Colorado Springs, he challenged them on the dubious connection they make between homosexuality and the breakdown of the family, and they conceded after lengthy discussion that the breakdown is more attributable to "heterosexual dysfunction than to homosexuals." So even here Wallis sees "common ground to build on." In a prototypically evangelical way, he holds in tension his determination to preach and practice reconciliation with his commitment to see and speak truthfully. About the current president he writes, "George Bush is my brother in Christ, but he is also the most dangerous president in American history."

For all Wallis's references to celebrity activists and politicians, the most quoted figure in this book, by my counting, is John Howard Yoder, who like William Stringfellow and Dorothy Day is among Wallis's heroes. *The Great Awakening* exemplifies what Yoder took to be the rare power of Jesus' *evangelion* to "unendingly meet new worlds"—an argument that Michael Cartwright described as Yoder's summons to "radical catholicity." This inescapably social good-news proclamation insists that our systems *are* our values and that they must be reordered in the direction of the new world on the way. In his robustly evangelical way of speaking to and for the world that God loves, Wallis builds on Yoder's legacy. May his energetically evangelical and radically catholic tribe increase.