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Can the Seamless Garment Be Sewn?  
The Future of Pro-Life Progressivism

Prophetic Politics: A New Option

Rev. Jim Wallis

*Fides et Iustitia*

## KEYNOTE ADDRESS

# PROPHETIC POLITICS: A NEW OPTION

REV. JIM WALLIS\*

Good afternoon.

Thank you very much. I am pleased to be here today at this innovative law school. I had a chance this morning to meet some of the law students and to hear from some of the deans and others. I am very encouraged by what is happening here and at this conference.

I recently spoke at the Los Angeles religious education conference, Cardinal Mahoney's conference, where I've spoken a number of times. I'm one of the token Protestants—and I told them, having grown up in the Evangelical tradition, it's really great to be a friend of the family. Evangelicals have a lot of conversions, you know; that is one of our hallmarks. I am a Protestant who converted to Catholic social teaching, a teaching that is a rare treasure for the whole Church. And I am always pleased when I come to Catholic conferences like this because I learn so much about this extraordinary framework through which we can learn to think about society and politics. And I am happy to be with John Carr, my old friend from Washington, D.C. We have collaborated, when we could, on so many things.

I'd like to talk about *changing the wind*, a metaphor I often use. I remember speaking to a group of welfare mothers on the Mall. They were there to lobby on behalf of effective welfare reform; there were about 2,000 of them. I call them "Burger King moms," as opposed to "soccer moms" and "NASCAR dads" and "security moms." I said, "I don't want you to have to waste your time, your valuable time, while you are here, so here is how you recognize the members of Congress: they are the people who always are running around with their fingers in the air to see which way the wind is blowing." And we too often think that changing one wet-fingered politician for another is what changes Washington.

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Practitioners of great social movements know better. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. knew better; Ghandi knew better. They knew we couldn't change a nation until we changed the wind. When you change the wind, politicians are enormously flexible and mobile in their movements. But you have to change public opinion to change the wind; you have to change how you think about things. That's our task today.

I want to tell you a story about another time I addressed some students—I see a lot of students here today. It was very different from a prestigious law school or—I was at Macalester last night—a great college. Rather, it was at Sing Sing Prison in upstate New York. They had written and asked if I could come and speak to their students. It sounded interesting, so I said, “Sure, when would you like me to come?” This young man—this young prisoner—wrote back and said, “Well,” he said, “we're free most nights.” He said, “We're kind of a captive audience.” A real comedian this man was. And so I wrote to the warden, and he gave us a room in the bowels of Sing Sing.

You know the phrase “up the river?” That's Sing Sing—up the Hudson River. And I was with these eighty inmates all alone—it was just us for about five hours, one night at Sing Sing. And one of them said something I'll not soon forget. He said, “Jim, most of us up here at Sing Sing—the whole group—are from just four or five neighborhoods in New York City.” Imagine that. It's a powerful image: just four or five neighborhoods. “It's like there's a train running through my neighborhood,” he said, “you get on that train when you're nine or ten years old, and that train ends at Sing Sing.” New York Theological Seminary was running a program that resulted in a certificate of theological studies inside the walls of Sing Sing, the only seminary program of its kind in the country. He has graduated. His sentence is up. We had devotions inside those walls, and he told me, “When I get out, I want to go back and stop that train.” That's my idea of a faith-based initiative.

I often go around the country saying, “Faith changes the big things.” The things in the world that cannot be changed, the things that seem *impossible* to change. That's my faith. My Bible says faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. My best paraphrase is: “Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change.” So I'm going to be talking about the big things that we can change, that faith has changed before and can do again. Three billion people living on two dollars a day is a big thing, a *big thing*. Half of God's children on the planet live on less than two dollars a day; or as John Carr described it, there's “a silent tsunami” claiming the lives of 30,000 children each and every day. Hunger and lack of clean drinking water—things we could change and change rather quickly if we ever decided to. That's a big thing. But there is another big thing that has to be changed and it is even deeper than something as profound as global poverty. This is the political

structure itself; the political categories we are imprisoned by, the political framework—which I would argue is not a framework; it’s a straitjacket. Washington has a political habit of taking an issue, making us afraid of it, and then blaming it on the other side, and then taking a poll, and seeing who won the poll. The election is just the final poll. They never get back around to solve the problem.

Two quick stories . . . The room was overflowing with students. They were sitting on the floor, out in the hallway. They were talking about their objections to the war in Iraq, their concerns about global poverty, HIV/AIDS, what are the most effective ways to protect the environment—and they talked about abortion. This was the University of Notre Dame; the students were Catholic, and they were struggling with how to vote their values.

One young woman stood up and said, “With four thousand people—four thousand unborn lives lost today—how can I vote on any other issue than that?” I let the question linger for a while to see what might happen. Another young man stood up and said, “Nine thousand people died today due to HIV/AIDS—what do I do about that?” Another one stood up and said, “Thirty thousand children died today because of hunger and diseases related to hunger—what do I do about that?” It was a good conversation. And the students concluded there was no pro-life candidate running in this election. There wasn’t a consistent life-ethic candidate or party running. How do I vote in light of what we talked about today was their question—how do I vote my values?

The Democrats fail to comprehend how fundamental the conviction on the sacredness of human life is for millions of people, millions of Christians, especially perhaps Catholics and Evangelicals—how deep this goes for us. The liberal political correctness, which includes a rigid litmus test of being pro-choice, really breaks down here. Their conventional wisdom is that people who are conservative on abortion or family values are so about everything else. They’re simply wrong, absolutely wrong. Christians are economic populists, peacemaking internationalists, and committed feminists, and can also be pro-life.

I was in Boston at the Institute of Politics in 2002 after another election. The others there were those who had just lost a recent election, so they’d become fellows at Harvard and thought it was prestigious. I hadn’t lost an election, but I was there—the only religious-type there. Well, a Republican political operative came to speak to us at a private, hallowed, big dinner one night. He had just run campaigns for five candidates for the Senate or gubernatorial offices, and he had won all five. He was full of his success, anxious to tell us about it, and let’s just say he wasn’t “nuancing” at all. And he said, “Here’s how it works: we win working-class people, middle-class people on social issues—those moral-cultural issues that Democrats don’t seem to understand or appreciate—and we get them to vote

against their own economic self-interest.” He said that out loud. “And the rich are on board with it,” and that’s how it went. That’s what he said. I’m not at all exaggerating the caricature. So I raised my hand. And he didn’t know who I was, so he called on me. And I said, “What would you do if you faced a candidate who, on social and cultural issues, although he or she wasn’t mean-spirited, was worried about the breakdown of the family?”

The thing is the broken-down family is a big deal—family breakdown, marriages unraveling. My neighborhood is 80 percent single-parent families. My friends, you can’t overcome poverty when you have 80 percent single-parent families. You’ve got to recreate the bond of family, community, and parenting. When I go around the country and say that parenting in America is becoming a countercultural activity, all parents nod their heads, liberal and conservative.

I continued before the Republican operative, “This candidate would be pro-family, pro-marriage, and pro-kids, and talk about the moral pollution of society. This candidate would be pro-life, would think abortion is a moral issue, and would at least press the obvious common ground that could be built (if political leaders in this country ever wanted to) between so-called pro-choice and pro-life people—about substantially reducing the massive numbers of unwanted pregnancies.” This could be done on the common ground that nobody wants to build: a pro-life strategy of personal responsibility and moral values, outspoken against the popular culture that aims its deadly ethos at children. I went on, “And our candidate would be an economic populist—pro-poor in social policy, tireless against corporate corruption and power, open in support and dedication to the environment, and committed to a foreign policy that emphasizes international law and multilateral cooperation over reactive and unilateral war.”

“What would you do,” I asked, “if you faced that kind of candidate?” There was a long pause in that room. And then this very smart Republican political operative said, “We would panic.” We would panic.

I’m now speaking on what I call *prophetic politics*, which during the election summarized the following question: how do I vote for that? Choices or values now are apparently defined among American people in such a way that the flawed exit poll you heard about after the election talked about moral values here and issues there, as if values aren’t embedded in issues. If I cared about the war in Iraq, I would have checked “Iraq” as my moral value, or if I were a Catholic soup kitchen coordinator, I would have checked “poverty, healthcare, and the economy”—not just “moral values.”

A Zogby poll came out a week later making it clear as to what is the moral crisis facing Americans. Sixty-four percent of the voters said it was “greed/materialism” or “poverty/economic justice”—64 percent. Too bad nobody spoke to that during this election. I was asked by a reporter after the election, “I guess your vision lost?” “No,” I said, “mine wasn’t run-

ning.” Mine wasn’t running. Nobody checked “poverty/poor people” as a moral value. Nobody talked about Iraq as a moral value. And there was this question, “When do we go to war? How do we go to war?” You know what? I’m going to tell the truth about going to war: it’s a question of moral values too. We’re saying this in our own country. And those values carry voters who vote all their values.

For the purpose of the conversation today, may I suggest there are three major political options in our public life. The first political option in America today is to be conservative at everything: from cultural, moral, and family concerns, to economic, environmental, and foreign policy issues. Differences arise between aggressive nationalists and cautious isolationists, corporate apologists and principled fiscal conservatives. But this is a political option clearly on the ascendancy in America, with most of the dominant ideas in the public square coming from the political Right.

The second political option in contemporary America is to be liberal on everything: family, sexual, cultural issues, and economic, environmental, and foreign policy matters. There are also differences among the liberals from pragmatic centrists to far leftists, but their intellectual and ideological roots come from the left side of the cultural and political spectrum. And today most of the left, liberal options find themselves on the defensive.

A third option in American politics—growing every day—is to be *laissez-faire*: liberal on cultural and moral issues, and conservative on fiscal, economic, and foreign policy. This option is the one with which I have least in common. This is the “just leave me alone and don’t spend my money” option, which is quickly growing in American life.

I have a fourth option for American politics, which hails from the prophetic religious tradition. It’s founded upon my own nineteenth-century evangelical heritage; I’m a nineteenth-century evangelical born in the wrong century—back when evangelicals were evangelists and abolitionists; they fought for social equality, for women’s suffrage, and for child labor-law reform. And, of course, I found my home in the black churches that led the civil rights movement based on the Bible.

This option is also, I think, reflective of Catholic social teaching. It is traditional, concerned with issues like family values, sexual integrity, and personal responsibility, while also being very progressive, even populist, even radical, on issues like poverty and racial justice. I am not liberal on economic justice; I am radical on economic justice because that’s what my faith requires of me, as it did of my own mentor, Dorothy Day. This option requires a dedicated stewardship of the earth and its resources, supporting clean air quality, and is more internationally-minded than nationalist, looking first to peacemaking and conflict resolution when it comes to foreign policy questions.

This option appeals to people with religious interests—and to those without them—who are very strong on issues like marriage, raising kids, individual ethics, and the sacredness of human life, without being unsympathetic, reactionary, mean-spirited, or scapegoating against any group of people, like homosexuals. They can be pro-life, pro-family, and pro-feminist all at the same time. They think issues of moral character are very important, both in a politician's personal life and in his or her policy choices. They are decidedly pro-poor, pro-racial reconciliation, critical of purely military solutions, and defenders of the environment. At the heart of the fourth option is the integral link between personal ethics and social justice. It appeals to people who refuse to make the false choice between the two.

Who are these people? As I said a minute ago, they are Catholics, Protestants, and Evangelicals, and they don't identify with the religious Right. They are members of all of our denominational churches who want to put their faith into practice. They are Jews and Muslims who are guided by an active faith, not just a personal background. They are people who do not consider themselves "religious" but, rather, spiritual, and would be drawn to a fourth option in politics; and they are people, religious or not, who consider themselves shaped through a sense of moral values and long for a political commitment that reflects them.

As I travel around the country, I find a whole reservoir of such people. Yet this is not a serious political option in Washington, D.C. or in any of our political parties. It transcends the categories of both the secular Left and the religious Right.

I believe it is time to assert a clear fourth political option. I've had conversations with E. J. Dionne along those lines, and he tells me there's this huge constituency of "non-right-wing Christians," as he calls them. They have to be organized. It's not much of a name for a movement, "non-right-wing Christians." But like each of us, we have personal, moral questions and are progressive on social justice. We have conversations with legislators, trying to get them to see that the roots of poverty are both cultural and structural, and the integration of the two is what finally will produce some solutions. One side says—and it's amazing to me, because I see the poor are trapped in the debate about poverty—"It's about family relationships and sexual immorality and personal choices and that's it." And the other side says, "It's about childcare investment, and adequate health-care, and affordable housing." And then these two sides come at it, and I know that neither of them must live anywhere near poor people because there are choices, behaviors, breakdowns in relationships that cause an entrenched poverty, and there are structures, policies, decisions, and choices that make escape from poverty impossible. The liberal and conservative sides continue to debate and the poor are left behind. And while that happens, most of them are still okay. But low-income families are not.

For us to make a new political option in this country, we must recognize that, as I say in the book, the Right gets it wrong and the Left doesn't get it. The Right is so comfortable with the language of religion, God, and faith that sometimes they seem like they think they own it. Own God? And then they simplify everything to two issues—to their own two moral values issues—abortion and gay marriage. I'm having a rigorous, tough conversation with many Democrats on the issue of abortion. Some of them are beginning to pay attention and change at least some of their language. But, I think and say, "Language is not enough; action is what's called for." Changing action and policy would be the test of whether defeat causes serious rethinking.

But I insist, as an evangelical Christian, that when there are thousands of verses in the Bible about the poor—I can't ignore them. So, fighting poverty is a moral values issue too. The pillars of the religious Right, the ones who don't want to teach evolution in our schools, quickly become social Darwinists when it comes to social policy—it's the survival of the fittest when it comes to social policy.

Protecting God's creation is a moral value. There was recently the miracle when the National Association of Evangelicals actually committed itself on global warming. It will change the political conversation in Washington, D.C. As Rich Cizik, vice president for governmental affairs of the NAE said, "I don't think God will ask us how he created the world but will ask us rather how we took care of the world he created"—one of the most Christian comments I ever heard.

The inconsistencies on the left and on the right are staggering. The Left is uncomfortable because they have let the party that was once linked with a mass civil-rights movement led by black church ministers become the secular party, disdainful of religion. In Boston, a young man came up to me with a book to be signed and said, "I'm gay. Thank you for making me—us—feel included tonight." "But, you know what," he said, "it's easier to come out as gay in Boston than to come out as religious in the Democratic Party."

I was on *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart*. Jon's an interesting guy. He's funny, but he's serious, and he had good questions, smart questions. He asked, "What's the relationship between trade, aid, and debt in overcoming global poverty?" I could tell he had read the book cover to cover because both questions come out at the end. And as we talked, he said, "Sir, you want to apply religion—like the teaching of Jesus—to politics?" And I could feel his whole audience of millions of young Americans say, "Oh, no, he's got some wacko evangelical on his show who is going to ruin my favorite show." And I said, "You know, I don't think that Jesus' first two priorities would have been the capital gains tax cut and the occupation of Iraq."

How did Jesus become pro-rich, pro-war, and only pro-American? My wife is an Anglican priest, one of the first women ordained in the Church of England ten years ago. She reminds her new American neighbors that “God bless America” is found no place in the Bible. How have we come to this place? I’m reminded by one of my Democratic friends, where would we be if the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., had kept his faith to himself? Lincoln had it right: you don’t claim God’s blessing on your nation, its policies, its practices. We should pray earnestly that we are on God’s side, rather than claiming, “God is on our side.” “God is on our side” leads to overconfidence, arrogance, and political hubris of all kinds. It leads to bad foreign policy, and preemptive and unilateral wars. “We’re on God’s side” leads to the missing values of politics: humility, penitence, reflection, and accountability.

If Lincoln got it right, King did it best, with his Bible in one hand, the Constitution in the other. He had a vision. The Bible says, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”<sup>1</sup> Well, the Democrats should know that without a vision, you lose elections. Where there is no vision, the people perish. The Revised Standard Version says, “Where there is no prophecy the people cast off restraint.”<sup>2</sup> And it says that those who perish first are always the most vulnerable—they are the kids who fall through the cracks of our debates, our endless posturing, and our self-involved discussions that don’t end up actually solving problems or saving lives.

The media is even worse. Did you know that there are only two sides to every social problem? Always two sides: Left and Right. They do these pre-interviews with you on television. It’s like an actor’s audition to see if these two talking heads have enough conflict to generate good television. They’re not trying to solve a problem; they’re trying to entertain with conflict-based television. They’re just a bit more moderate than Jerry Springer.

Youth violence does not have two sides. Many articles have cited this: there are many stakeholders, many constituencies, many perspectives needed to solve the problems. I feel a country hungry for the politics of solutions, and the politics of hope.

Religious teachings should not be used as wedges or weapons to incite violence across hostile, red-blue dividing lines. They’re meant to be bridges, bridges that bring us together. We find common ground by moving to higher ground. And you know, I’ve just spent seven weeks on the road at these town meetings disguised as book signings. We’re all talking about what common ground might look like, even on the toughest, most controversial questions. And there’s a hunger for it, a hunger for a new conversation.

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1. *Proverbs* 29:18 (King James).

2. *Proverbs* 29:18 (Rev. Stand.).

There's more than just talk. There's a hunger for the word I hear all the time: movement, movement, movement. I want to join something; I want to be part of something. There's a whole generation that doesn't like our "take them out back and throw them in the trash can" mentality.

I keep hearing, "I want what's right, and I want what works." They know what's right and what's wrong.

I think we're all going to a new place that will provide us with some new solutions, and a new conversation about faith and values and politics.

And I believe that we should take on something that's as big as this, as big as trying to fashion and form another political option. I'm not talking about a political party. I'm talking about a political option.

What changes history are always social movements. Social movements that have a spiritual foundation are the best ones. Movements don't worry about politics, politicians, and elections. But in fact they change politics, politicians, and elections.

I'm often asked to talk about two things—counseling departments appreciate this—your vocation and your career. I encourage you to think about your vocation more than just your career. Asking the vocational question, rather than just considering the career options, will take you much deeper. Start by discerning your gift while you're doing it. What's in your gut, your heart and soul? What makes you who you are? What's your passion? What were you put on this earth to do? When your gift meets the pressing needs of the world, that's your vocation. The connection between your passion and the crushing needs of the world is your vocation. Discern your passion. It's like your essence; it's like your passion broken loose upon the world. So, cherish your passion, and cherish the needs of the world.

So, what am I talking about? It's not just about issues; it's really about a new political option. All of you (including the Protestants), the Catholic social teaching, this school, this teaching, this consistent ethic of upholding life, which Cardinal Bernardin so eloquently defended—and let me just say that I miss Cardinal Bernardin so much in these days, with that kind of ethic and that kind of wisdom—we can build political action out of this ethic, and this nation is hungry for it, ready for it, and maybe even in Washington they may pay some attention to it, if we were to change the wind.

Let me just close with another quick story. I had a mentee, a young woman. Her name was Lisa Sullivan; she was smart—a young African-American woman, she went to Yale to get her Ph.D. She had a ticket to anywhere, and she came back to D.C. to the kids on the street. She was the best street organizer I have ever known. She was hip-hop and rap. She scolded, she hugged, she loved, and she cared for those kids, and she transformed thousands of lives. And she put the capacity in place for all these street-wise organizations. But the problem was that Lisa, who had such a

big heart, had a heart ailment that no one knew about. And in a few weeks, my good friend and board member, before she was forty years old, had died. Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund and I held each other at Lisa's grave site and just wept because Lisa was the future, she was the star, she was what we were waiting for. But she leaves us words of wisdom, which I have in the commission of the book because I think Lisa's words are a trumpet call. When people would tell her "Lisa, it's too big—the problem is too big—and we're too small; the fires, the chaos, the deaths, these are too big, and our capacity, our faith, is just too small," she would get angry and say, "Don't say that, don't say it's too big and we're too small." "Don't you understand," she'd say, "don't you understand? We are the ones we have been waiting for."

We are the ones we have been waiting for. We are the ones. Do you know what creating a political option takes? It takes just a good handful of people to take Lisa's words seriously. So, we are the ones, by God's grace and with God's help, who will create a new political option in America. Because the nation is hungry and thirsty, and it's time for us to offer a vision without which the people are perishing.