

The Politics of the Golden Rule

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, January 19, 2005

Conventional wisdom holds that the Republicans have a lock on moral values. Not so, says Christian evangelical leader Jim Wallis. His new book, *God's Politics*, argues that both parties have it wrong when it comes to religion. The Left insists on an unrealistic disconnect between religious values and political life, while the Right argues that it speaks for God and misguidedly claims a monopoly on moral values. As Americans and people worldwide gather around their TVs to watch President Bush's second inauguration, we would be wise to reflect on whether US political leadership is fulfilling the obligations of our expressed moral values.

In the months since the election, political analysts and voters alike have determined that Bush's victory was, at least in part, evidence of the power of the Christian Right and the President's fervent embrace of moral issues. Many polls showed that "moral values" was the most important concern for voters. The Republicans' success among churchgoers makes it clear that Democrats must do a better job of communicating how moral and religious values relate to policies designed to alleviate poverty, preserve the environment, and protect human rights. The President's decisive victory and voters' post-election feedback seemed to translate into a mandate for Bush's so-called religious agenda. Wallis insists, however, that neither the Republican Party nor President Bush is entitled to a monopoly on morality. At first glance, Wallis seems an unlikely critic of the Right: he is a prominent evangelical leader and the founder and editor of the Christian magazine *Sojourner*. However, Wallis argues that the Republicans' understanding of moral values often falls short of the true Judeo-Christian spirit, which calls for an unyielding commitment to peace and social justice.

Another Republican president once asserted, "The question is not whether God is on our side. The question is whether we are on God's side." I imagine that Abraham Lincoln might feel his party has failed to reflect on whether four years of "compassionate conservatism" has lived up to prophetic values such as sacrificial generosity. Indeed, there is both room and need for religious standards in political life. Wallis points out that Judeo-Christian faith and traditions do not permit us to abandon the poor, overlook racism, or trample human rights. We have a duty to bring biblical lessons into everyday life: loving our neighbors—globally.

Living up to prophetic values would change domestic and foreign policy in profound ways. The proof of faith isn't words. It's deeds. The UN's Millennium Challenge, for example, aims to alleviate the suffering

of the one billion people in abject destitution. The world's most developed countries committed to giving 0.7% of their annual incomes in development aid to the world's poorest nations by 2015.

At the Monterey poverty summit in 2002, President Bush proudly announced that the US would increase assistance to poor nations. He pledged \$1.7 billion, \$3.3 billion, and \$5 billion during fiscal years 2004 through 2006. But he asked Congress for far less. Then Congress scaled back the President's request even further, allocating only \$1 billion in 2004 and \$1.5 billion in 2005. Worse yet, not a single dollar has actually been dispersed. All the while, according to the UN, more than one thousand young children die every hour, primarily from preventable or treatable diseases. Despite our commitment, the United States still gives the least aid as a proportion of gross national product. We Americans must ask if our actions are a true reflection of our moral standards. How do we reconcile last year's \$87 billion in Iraq with only \$1 billion going to the Millennium Challenge Account and development aid?

God's Politics reminds us of the people mortal politics forget. Denying a role for religion in the public sphere is a missed opportunity and neglected responsibility. As we watch the President take his oath, with one hand on the Bible, we'd do well to reflect on its contents: "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these, ye have done unto me."