

Views & Reviews

ARTS AND LITERATURE VIEWS AND REVIEWS

THE GREAT AWAKENING: REVIVING FAITH & POLITICS IN A POST-RELIGIOUS RIGHT AMERICA

BY JIM WALLIS

HARPERONE, 352 PAGES

Reviewed by Nick Richardson

In this, his latest book, evangelist Jim Wallis warmly welcomes the fact that the Religious Right no longer dominates Christian discourse as once it did. He is, indeed, openly delighted that our fellow citizens, of other faiths and none, are learning at last that one noisy, narrowly-focused and intolerant fundamentalist group does not represent all or even most Christians.

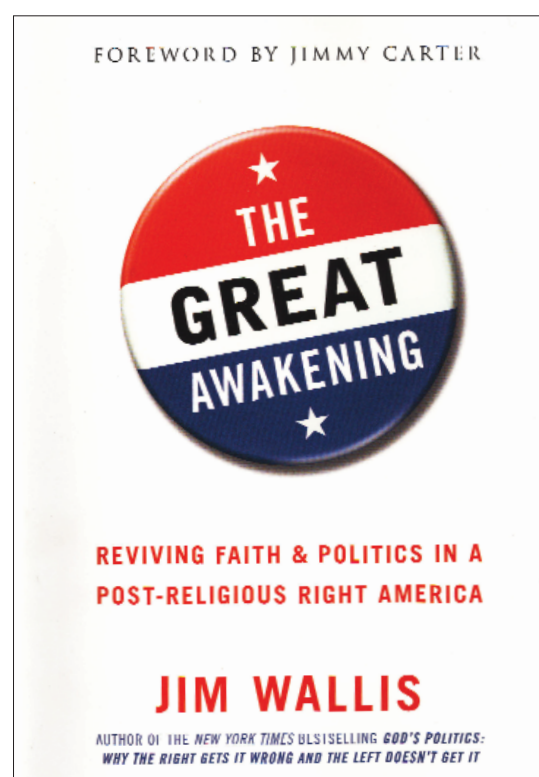
But what we have here is not the mere triumphant ranting of a prominent progressive, dancing (prematurely, perhaps) on the grave of once-mighty conservatives: the focus of *The Great Awakening* is overwhelmingly on the future, not the past—and Wallis sees that future being shaped, above all, by the direct heirs of the very same fundamentalist evangelicals whose baleful influence he is so glad to see diminished. This book is, in fact, about the enormous opportunity that the author sees in the growing rejection by young evangelicals' of private piety, affluent conformity and mindless patriotism in favor of taking their faith into the world and, above all, of pursuing justice.

Wallis provides the reader with evidence of this change. He expounds his belief that it can develop into the engine of a third Great Awakening, in which the power of faith is once more channeled into the public square and towards improving the condition

of the "least among us." Looking back at earlier Great Awakenings and at the church-led civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, he argues cogently for the vital role in social justice movements of a firm foundation in faith. Only thus equipped, he says, can activists hope to prevail through the inevitable trials and hardships; only faith can provide a bulwark against despair.

The central purpose of *The Great Awakening*, beyond heralding the growing realization among evangelicals that they must take seriously all of Christ's teachings, beyond celebrating the opportunity for societal change that this offers, is to outline his vision of the direction it should take. His general thesis—one of a middle way, or "Moral Center," in which Christians identify with neither political party, but support individual policies on moral grounds—is one that he has been developing over many years. "I believe faith communities should be the ultimate swing vote," he writes, "...the faith community should be in nobody's political pocket..."

Wallis uses most of this optimistic book to explore



how Christians can best harness the power of their nascent communal recognition of their duty in and to the world. He covers a broad range of topics—including poverty, the environment, war/violence, social justice, separation of church and state, abortion, family and/or community, and political corruption—and shies away from none of the central ones. He considers both what Christians can do alone, and how they can influence the state.

In doing so, he avoids the unrealistic suggestion that governments will change their intrinsic nature, and he refuses to throw in his lot with any political party. At the same time he insists that, in spite of governments' irredeemably secular nature, people of faith, acting together, can push them to act in ways that really will make the world more just, and that we really can hold them accountable for what they do in our names.

If the third Great Awakening is, as Wallis argues, under way, this book is likely to hold a central position in the navigation room.

Richardson is communications officer for the diocese.

AFTER THE BABY BOOMERS: HOW TWENTY- AND THIRTY-SOMETHINGS ARE SHAPING THE FUTURE OF AMERICAN RELIGION

BY ROBERT WUTHNOW

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 312 PAGES

Reviewed by Dr. Sharon L. Miller

No, Episcopalians don't have to give up their liturgy in order to attract young adults to their churches, but it would behoove them to understand the next generation and their particular needs. Robert Wuthnow's latest book *After the Baby Boomers* meticulously examines survey data from a wide variety of sources in order to move beyond anecdotes and the widely held beliefs so many of us hold about young adults, who represent one-third of the U.S. population.

The future of American religion rests with this generation (as may be said with every generation) and there are causes for concern. This is a generation of tinkerers, Wuthnow states, a generation that frequently changes jobs and homes, and thinks nothing of cobbling together rituals and practices from a variety of religious sources. Young adults are more likely to take their religious cues from science, philosophy, other religions, music and their friends, rather than from what they were taught as children in church.

Church shopping, hopping and surfing are normal practices for young adults and if they attend church at all, it is likely to be chosen based on its programs, outreach and convenience, rather than on any denominational affiliation.

What perhaps characterizes this generation the most is the longer transition to adulthood. Uncertainties about work and money often contribute to delaying the adult markers of marriage and children, and Wuthnow notes with concern that marriage and children are the two most significant variables that determine whether or not a person regularly attends church. A growing proportion of the population (of any age) is now single, and many are choosing not to have children.

Wuthnow makes a plea for churches to take seriously the needs of this generation. Many churches devote significant resources for programs and services for families, children,

teens and college youth, but there is little specifically for young, single adults. Young adults lack the institutional support they need and deserve, he observes: "We cannot hope to be a strong society if we invest resources in young people until they are 18 or 20 and

then turn them out to find their way entirely on their own." But he warns that this generation of tinkerers will not be satisfied with readymade answers. "We need a thorough-going discussion of the needs that young adults experience... How young adults can more responsibly make complex decisions about careers, finances, marriage, and parenting must be an important part of these discussions."

There is no better place to begin this discussion than by reading *After the Baby Boomers*.

Miller is an associate director at the Center for the Study of Theological Education at Auburn Theological Seminary.

