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A CONVERSATION ON RELIGION WITH JON MEACHAM AND SALLY QUINN



EBOO PATEL

THE FAITH DIVIDE

Eboo Patel is founder and executive director of the [Interfaith Youth Core](#), a Chicago-based international nonprofit that promotes interfaith cooperation. His blog, [The Faith Divide](#), explores what drives faiths apart and what brings them together. [more »](#)

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The Jim Wallis Generation

The summer after my sophomore year in college, I took to the road. I was up to my ears in critical analysis, and needed an equal education in concrete action.

My friend Jeff and I drove from Chicago south to Atlanta, and then north to Boston, looking for people leading lives of creativity and commitment. We spent a lot of time in Christian social justice communities, and the one name we kept hearing over and over again was Jim Wallis.

All of these places had copies of the magazine *Rev.* Wallis edits, [Sojourners](#), on their coffee tables, and many had his books on their shelves. Some people even said that Jim Wallis was the closest thing alive to Dorothy Day, the heroic founder of the [Catholic Worker](#) movement. Like Dorothy, Jim Wallis was nurturing a community, a movement, and a new conversation about faith and politics all at the same time.

When Jeff and I arrived in DC, one of our first stops was the Sojourners offices. Jim's colleagues said that his schedule was packed with meetings all day, and he was leaving the next morning on an extended trip. There was no hope of seeing him.

But Jeff and I didn't give up that easily.

We found out where Jim's house was - in a gritty neighborhood in DC - and we hung out on his porch until he came home. When Jim finally arrived, we told him our story and he talked to us for a good while about what it meant to connect faith and justice in our times.

The Religious Right was a dominant force in American politics then. And the things that we believed in - most of all, a public faith that expanded freedom and cared about people - seemed both a memory and a dream.

Over the next ten years or so, I went to see Jim Wallis preach every chance I got. Once, a few years ago, my wife and I were having a weekend getaway at a bed and breakfast in rural Michigan when I saw in the local paper that Jim was preaching at a church thirty miles away. I looked at my watch. We could make it if we wolfed our eggs down.

"You owe me another weekend away," my wife said as we drove to the church. But when it was over, she commented that she hadn't been inspired like that in a long time.

Nothing substitutes for Jim Wallis in the pulpit (or, if you're lucky, in a personal conversation on his porch), but his new book, [The Great Awakening](#), comes pretty close.

For many years, Rev. Wallis has been saying that "The monologue of the Religious Right is over." In this book, he declares that movement dead and gone, and challenges people of good faith - which he explicitly states includes believers of all backgrounds, and nonbelievers as well - to fill that vacuum with spiritually-based pragmatic approaches that genuinely solve the problems of climate change, poverty and violence.

He likens our time to previous great awakenings, eras where movements that brought together spirituality and social justice changed the world.

My favorite stories in this book are about young people: The eleven year old girl who approaches Jim after his talk in Minneapolis and says, "Well ... I think we are just going to have to change the world."

"And who is going to do that?" he asks.

"I think people like me," she answers.

A few days later, an eight-year-old girl approaches him and says, "When you talked about the silent tsunami that is killing so many children every day because of poverty - children, like me ... I was just

sitting there and started to think to myself, If I'm a Christian, I better do something about that."

What astounded Jim about these young people was that they were saying that some things that we've gotten used to in this world are simply not acceptable – children starving, for one. They were taking responsibility for changing that, and connecting their deepest identity – their faith - to that change. They were saying, "I can't be a Christian and stand by while that horror happens." That combination of declaring business as usual unacceptable and committing mind, body and soul to overturning it has been at the heart of every great movement, from Civil Rights in America to the Struggle in South Africa.

In dark times, I hear Jim Wallis's voice in my head, quoting Hebrews 11:1, "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." And offering his famous paraphrase of that: Hope is believing in spite of the evidence, and then watching the evidence change.

Jim testifies that the evidence is in fact changing, the pendulum is swinging back. He is too humble to state another truth: that he and a few others have been doing the hard work of pushing that pendulum for the last three decades, preaching the good news during difficult times to small groups in church basements, patiently mentoring a generation of people who see faith and justice as necessarily linked.

We are coming of age now, the Jim Wallis generation. And we are ready to change the world.

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