

Faith-based politics: An exchange: Principled, not partisan, politics

by [Jim Wallis](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

This is a response to an [article by Jan G. Linn](#).

Jan Linn raises some old questions that I thought had been laid to rest. He says that groups like Sojourners/Call to Renewal should not be making religious faith a qualification for president, aligning themselves with partisan politics (like the religious right does) and mixing religion and politics. Linn writes: “I was heartened to hear that faith and prayer serve as a source of personal strength for these political leaders, but it completely escapes me how this affects their qualifications to be president.”

It also escapes me. We are not asking that faith be a qualification for office but asking how, in the case of candidates who are people of religious faith, their faith grounds, informs or shapes their political leadership and public policies.

I have consistently argued that political appeals, even if rooted in religious convictions, should be argued on moral grounds rather than presented as sectarian religious demands—so that citizens, whether religious or not, can hear and respond. Religion must be disciplined by democracy and contribute to a better and more moral public discourse. Religious convictions must be translated into moral arguments, and the arguments must win the political debate before they are implemented. Religious people don’t win the argument just because they are religious. They, like any other citizens, have to convince their fellow citizens that what they propose is best for the common good.

Clearly, part of the work to be done includes teaching religious people how to make their appeals in moral language and secular people not to fear that such appeals will lead to theocracy.

Joel Hunter, senior pastor of Northland Church in Florida, who participated in the Sojourners candidates forum, later wrote, “Issues will come and go, stances will

sometimes change, and circumstances will affect how a value is put into practice. But the one thing that seldom changes is the process of how we determine right from wrong. Are there certain points of reference, like the Bible, or the teachings of somebody, or a past mentor that the candidate thinks about? Are there particular people that a candidate consults?" Those are all legitimate areas to explore with candidates.

From his experience with People of Faith for Kerry, Linn concludes that those involved were aligning themselves with "partisan politics" and therefore "vulnerable to the charge that what we believed in as Christians was nothing more than partisan politics."

I certainly agree that religion should not be made into a partisan commodity. Our forum was not offering partisan support for any candidate. But it is indeed important to address societal issues on the basis of our values of faith, compassion and justice.

Wilberforce was right to focus on a bill to end the slave trade in 18th-century Britain; King was right to focus on civil rights and voting rights legislation in the 1960s; and Bono is right to focus on the aid, debt and trade promises that the G8 nations make to Africa today. To do so is to practice a religiously inspired moral politics that holds all parties accountable, not to practice a narrow partisan politics.

We should hold all sides accountable to a moral agenda. The faith community should be in no party's or candidate's pocket, and indeed, it will often be required to demonstrate what is meant by moral public leadership in matters of vital concern that secular politics tends to ignore. Faith communities should be the ultimate swing vote, always examining issues and candidates on the basis of their own moral convictions and compass. I believe that it is time to offer that prophetic religious leadership, on a broad range of issues, and that America's faith communities are ready for that constructive role. We can and must do this in a much better way than the religious right has done in recent decades—perhaps more in the way black churches did it during the civil rights movement.

When Linn says that "our nation's founders were wise to want religion and politics to be separate," and that the Sojourners forum played into the "undermining of the religious neutrality of our form of government," he repeats one of the most pervasive misunderstandings of our time. The framers of the Constitution mandated a separation of the institutions of church and state. The state should not establish

any particular faith (or lack of faith), nor should it prevent the exercising of any (or no) faith. But the separation of church and state does not require the segregation of faith from public life or moral values from politics. Individuals, including political candidates, are not required to separate their faith from their involvement in public life.

Linn claims that King “may have relied on scripture when he was preaching about racial and economic justice from a church pulpit. But when he spoke to the nation, he appealed to the rights of all U.S. citizens on the basis of the Constitution.” Well said; King often spoke with his Bible in one hand and the Constitution in the other. But he was always grounded in his faith and didn’t hesitate to say so.

King’s famous speech on the Vietnam war was given from a church pulpit. It was not a Sunday morning sermon, but it was a significant policy speech to the nation about how we had lost our moral compass. In that speech, he explained that he had come to oppose the war because he believed he had to “live with the meaning of my commitment to the ministry of Jesus Christ. To me the relationship of this ministry to the making of peace is so obvious that I sometimes marvel at those who ask me why I’m speaking against the war.”

A forum on “faith, values and poverty” with leading candidates is appropriate in a presidential season. This forum showed that Democratic candidates, along with Republican candidates (who will appear in a similar forum in September), can be comfortable with issues of faith and public life, respect the separation of church and state, and show their own faith to be both personal and real while connecting it to broad policy issues like poverty, environmental responsibility, criminal justice, war and peace, the notion of the common good, the sanctity of life and healthy families (and thankfully not just the last two issues).

Our forum recalled the words of Lincoln, who warned us not to believe that God is on our side, but to worry and pray earnestly that we are on God’s side. We might also heed the advice of the U.S. Catholic bishops, whose guidelines on faith and public life bear repeating. As Christians, they wrote, we are called to be political but not partisan, principled but not ideological, clear but also civil, engaged but not used.

The question is not whether faith should shape politics, but how. That was the subject of our forum.