

*Faithworks*, by Jim Wallis

reviewed by [Robert F. Drinan](#) in the [July 19, 2000](#) issue

In the preface to this book, Bill Moyers says that Jim Wallis is hard to "put into a box and label." Though Wallis, the editor of *Sojourners*, presents the gospel of individual piety, he is nothing like the Religious Right that roared back when religious liberals called for racial justice and the end of the Vietnam war. Indeed, Wallis thinks that the sun has set on those evangelicals who created the Christian Coalition. He wants the churches to focus on speaking prophetically about economic justice and world peace.

Wallis tells stories and recites statistics about poverty. He rambles on about famous figures he has known and about his movement and his magazine. He offers advice and exhorts us to listen to the prophets and follow the gospel. He scolds, thunders and inspires.

Wallis is rooted in the evangelical tradition in which he was brought up, and echoes of Billy Graham's voice sound in the book. But to the traditional evangelical point of view Wallis adds crusades against nuclear weapons, racism, poverty, drugs and public officials who voted for curbs on welfare. Hence Wallis, the activist preacher, stands somewhat alone. He praises faith-based local organizations as the ideal and in some ways the only agencies that can rectify the acute social problems of the inner city.

At a forum recently I asked Wallis whether his emphasis on faith-based organizations (FBOs) did not allow the government to evade its responsibility to the poor by transferring the problem to religious groups. Wallis responded that both Gore and Bush have pledged that in their administrations FBOs would have a place at the table.

Wallis claims that at its 1999 national summit in Washington, his "Call for Renewal" won the support of many public officials. But I think he overpraises the "charitable choice" provision in the 1996 welfare bill which allows new opportunities for church-based nonprofits. Wallis considers these issues in his book, but some will not be satisfied with his attempted resolution of the problems raised by the FBOs.

Wallis is a man of courage and great faith. He has been working for the poor and the marginalized for 30 years. He is a model of Christian values who has a vision of a good society not often associated with evangelicals-many of whom almost instinctively stay away from political issues. We should therefore be grateful for Wallis's mission and his prophetic witness.

But Wallis does not refer very often to the Catholic and Protestant churches' extensive engagement with and abundant literature on social justice. The long Jewish emphasis on social justice also is not adequately reflected in Wallis's book. And he is weak on arguments for basic structural reform in society.

Evangelicals in the U.S. have radiated a robust Christianity that has been in many ways outside the mainstream. Wallis is expanding that tradition in vigorous and faith-filled ways-a development that is good for all Christians and for the nation.