

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

RESTORING AMERICA'S PROMISE OF OPPORTUNITY,  
PROSPERITY AND GROWTH

Washington, D.C.

Wednesday, April 5, 2006

PORTION – REVEREND JIM WALLIS

REV. WALLIS: I am very pleased to be here today and part of this very significant new effort. Thank you, Bob and Roger and Peter.

I am actually very encouraged by all of this and find it quite hopeful, something the country indeed needs. I am here to say the changes in the direction and priorities of our economic policy that The Hamilton Project represents are not only smart but also right. The combination of smart and right, normally, historically, is what changes are often made of.

Now what is a preacher doing here, you might be asking, with CEOs and academic economists. Well, someone in the reception asked me: Doesn't the Bible speak to some of this stuff? And I said: Yes, about 2,000 verses on the subject of economics, wealth and poverty, rich and poor, the stuff of life. In fact, the prophets were very public. They spoke to things like land, labor, capital, equity, fairness, justice. They spoke to princes, rulers, kings, employers, judges—on behalf of often widows, orphans, workers, those left behind.

I would like to start with a story. I was at Davos. They had a handful of religious leaders there. I think after 911, they were afraid religious wars might interrupt the economic climate. So they had some of us come to speak to this. But they also, I think, were open in a new way to how religious, moral, and ethical conversation, in fact, impacts on economics.

I was asked to speak to a panel entitled: Should We Despair of Our Disparities? Do great disparities lead to dangerous imbalances and social unrest? Does reducing those inequalities lead to greater social health and peace and even to a more long term balanced economic growth? It was our topic.

I said, I think I am probably here to bring a religious perspective, and so let me try. I would like to talk about a topic that I know is a hot one here at Davos, and certainly at Brookings as well. Of course, I am speaking of the subject of Biblical Archaeology.

(Laughter)

REV. WALLIS: I am sure that is something often debated here in this auditorium because indeed it is relevant to our discussion.

When the Biblical archaeologists dig down in the ruins of ancient Israel, they find periods of time when the houses and the artifacts of life are about the same size, show a relative kind of shared prosperity, not a sameness but a relative kind of shared prosperity. During those periods, interestingly, there are no prophets, no Isaiah, no Jeremiah, no Micah, no Amos. When they dig down and they find other periods of time, when the houses and mansions are great and the shacks are small and the instruments of life show a great disparity between the people, like the 8<sup>th</sup> century, that is when the prophets rise up

to thunder the judgment and justice of God. The Biblical prophets thought these topics vital to the health and even security of nations.

How do we have a new conversation about such things that appeals not only to what is practical but also that appeals to our best values, to competence but also integrity? Maybe the greatest hungers in the world today, as I meet young people all across the world, are on the one hand for spiritual integrity, on the one hand the great hunger for that, and also for social justice on the other. The connection between the two, indeed, is the one the world is waiting for.

One of those issues for us in the religious community that has brought us together, as you know I have done a lot of gang truce work—Crips and Bloods and Vice Lords—to help get me ready for working with churches and the religious community because we often are like gangs—territory, turf, grudges, grievances. We even have paraphernalia often.

(Laughter)

REV. WALLIS: We have seen that coming together, almost like a gang truce movement, in the religious community on this issue on what happens to those left out and left behind.

The waters of Katrina washed away lives and property and whole cities. Will they also wash away our public denial of just how many people in this richest nation in the world are poor? Will they wash away our still public reluctance to admit the still persistent connection between race and poverty in this nation? Will they wash away those policies and priorities and frameworks, Bob, that have led to a shredding of any notion of the common good and even our social safety nets?

In particular, most Americans, if asked, across a political spectrum, believe that if you work hard, full time and responsibly in America, you should not be poor. You should not raise your children in poverty. Yet, 9 million American families do that every day. Somebody in that house works hard, full time, and they raise 20 million kids in poverty. That is not just not smart; it is also wrong.

You will see in the religious community a coming together now. Across all our battles about abortion and gay marriage and all the rest, around this question, we are finding a deep convergence, coming together.

I think this project holds great potential for and, in fact, involving the religious community. I think the language of Washington should begin to embrace a moral vocabulary. Budgets are moral documents. They reveal the priorities, the values of a family, a church, a synagogue, a city, a state, or a Nation. What is important? What is not? Who is important? Who is not? This is a moral conversation, also a very practical one. The prophets reveal not just what is right but also wisdom for how to structure our societies.

The Nation is not hungry for, in my case, a religious left to counter a religious right. They are hungry for a moral center to our public discourse, not a mushy political middle but a moral center. We look at what are the moral challenges and choices that lie right beneath economic policy and political choices and discussion. You don't go left; you don't go right; you go deeper.

I would love to see that conversation, Peter—Adam Smith: Moral Philosophy, Economic Policy. I think if we can have a new conversation between what is smart and

what is right, between competence and values, the American people will be eager to listen.

So I am grateful for this and happy to be part of it. Thank you.

(Applause)