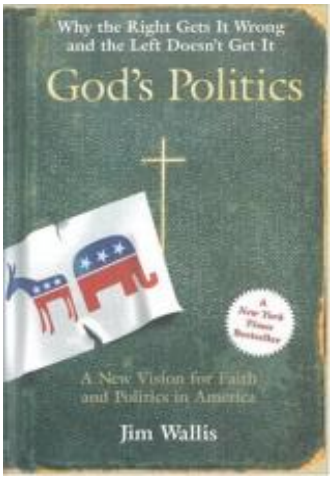
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God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It

by Jim Wallis



About the Book

Since when did believing in God and having moral values make you pro-war, pro-rich, and pro-Republican? And since when did promoting and pursuing a progressive social agenda with a concern for economic security, health care, and educational opportunity mean you had to put faith in God aside?

While the Right in America has hijacked the language of faith to prop up its political agenda -- an agenda not all people of faith support -- the Left hasn't done much better, largely ignoring faith and continually separating moral discourse and personal ethics from public policy. While the Right argues that God's way is their way, the Left pursues an unrealistic separation of religious values from morally grounded political leadership. The consequence is a false choice between ideological religion and soulless politics.

The effect of this dilemma was made clear in the 2004 presidential election. The Democrats' miscalculations have left them despairing and searching for a way forward. It has become clear that someone must challenge the Republicans' claim that they speak for God, or that they hold a monopoly on moral values in the nation's public life. Wallis argues that America's separation of church and state does not require banishing moral and religious values from the public square. In fact, the very survival of America's social fabric depends on such values and vision to shape our politics -- a dependence the nation's founders recognized.

God's Politics offers a clarion call to make both our religious communities and our government more accountable to key values of the prophetic religious tradition -- that is, make them pro-justice, pro-peace, pro-environment, pro-equality, pro-consistent ethic of life (beyond single issue voting), and pro-family (without making scapegoats of single mothers or gays and lesbians). Our biblical faith and religious traditions simply do not allow us as a nation to continue to ignore the poor and marginalized, deny racial justice, tolerate the ravages of war, or turn away from the human rights of those made in the image of God. These are the values of love and justice, reconciliation, and community that Jesus taught and that

are at the core of what many of us believe, Christian or not. In the tradition of prophets such as Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Desmond Tutu, Wallis inspires us to hold our political leaders and policies accountable by integrating our deepest moral convictions into our nation's public life.

Discussion Guide

Introduction: Why Can't We Talk About Religion and Politics?

God's Politics challenges everything about our politics. It reminds us of the people who are always neglected -- the poor, vulnerable, and left behind. And it challenges Left and Right by offering a new vision for faith and politics in America.

- Polling results after the 2004 election emphasized "moral values" as a deciding factor, but differed on what that meant. What is your definition of moral values? Did that influence your choice of who to vote for? What do you think are the most important moral values in politics?

Chapter 1: Take Back the Faith -- Co-opted by the Right, Dismissed by the Left

Many people feel that their faith has been "stolen" by one political side and ignored by the other. We need to return to a genuine evangelical faith rescued from the distortions of both Right and Left.

- Do you agree that the Right focuses faith narrowly on sexual and cultural issues, while the Left doesn't understand the meaning of faith for politics at all? If so, how was this demonstrated in the 2004 election?

- How does the "politics of Jesus" offer an alternative to the political and economic agenda of the religious Right?

Chapter 2: A Lack of Vision -- Too Narrow or None at All

America today faces two related vision problems. One is the lack of vision in public life; the other is that political leaders have a clear vision, but the wrong one. The Hebrew prophets and Jesus offer a new vision of our common life and public commitments.

- What is your vision of politics in America? What are the public implications of your spiritual values

- What does it mean to change society by "changing the wind?" How can people of faith become "wind changers?"

Chapter 3: Is There a Politics of God? -- God Is Personal but Never Private

God is personal -- if not, there is little meaning to faith. But that personal God is never private, relevant only to individual morality while oblivious to public issues.

- What is the difference between "God's politics" and using God to justify our politics? How are God's politics different from ours?

Chapter 4: Protest is Good; Alternatives Are Better

Political protest should not be simply a politics of complaint; it should show the way to personal and social transformation through offering alternatives. Being for an alternative brings more energy and possibilities to the political debate than only being against.

- In the polarized agenda of today's partisan politics, what solutions could go beyond the debates to show a way forward on the most important challenges facing us? How do we move from complaining about the way things are to creating viable alternatives?

Chapter 5: How Should Your Religious Faith Influence Your Politics?

Religious fundamentalism at its worst seeks political power to impose a theocracy, while secular fundamentalism attempts to restrict religious faith only to houses of worship. The real question is not whether religious faith should influence a society and its politics, but how.

- What are your observations about the role of religious faith in the 2004 election campaign? Why does it seem as if people who regularly attend worship services vote Republican, while those who don't vote Democratic

- Discuss the differences between the religious Right and the Civil Rights movement.

Chapter 6: Prophetic Politics -- A New Option

There are three dominant political options in America. One is conservative on everything -- from cultural and family concerns to economic and foreign policy issues. A second is liberal on everything. The third is libertarian -- liberal on cultural/moral issues and conservative on fiscal/economic and foreign policy. There is a fourth option -- traditional or "conservative" on issues of family values and sexual integrity while progressive or populist on issues of economic justice and peacemaking.

- How would you react to a candidate who took a traditional moral stance on social and cultural issues -- being decidedly pro-family, pro-life (meaning really waning to lower the abortion rate), strong on personal responsibility and moral values, outspoken against the moral pollution throughout popular culture; AND was also an economic populist, pro-poor in social policy, tough on corporate corruption and power, clear in supporting middle-class families in health-care and education, an environmentalist, and committed to a foreign policy that emphasized international law and multi-lateral cooperation over pre-emptive and unilateral war?

Chapter 7: Be Not Afraid -- A Moral Response to Terrorism September 11, 2001, changed our lives, and since then we have been a nation living in fear.

That fear has led us to accept policies that promised to end our vulnerability, yet we must still go to the roots of terrorism for an effective response.

- What are the "two paths" that emerged in response to the terrorist attacks? What opportunities were missed to combat terrorism and what opportunities remain for responding to it

- What role can the religious community play in developing a moral response to terrorism?

Chapter 8: Not a Just War -- The Mistake of Iraq

While Saddam Hussein was a brutal dictator, and removing him from power a legitimate goal, there were ways other than war to accomplish that end. The war and continuing occupation of Iraq have weakened the system of international law and the cooperation needed to truly combat the threat of terrorism.

- What are the ways other than war that could have dealt with Saddam Hussein? Do you agree or disagree that they could have succeeded

- What has been sacrificed and by whom in the war and ongoing occupation?

Chapter 9: Dangerous Religion -- The Theology of Empire

The word "empire" is increasingly used to describe American power in the world, and is defended by the president with

religious language. This nationalist religion is a challenge to people of faith, who must now decide to whom to be loyal.

- What is the difference between a Christian theology and an American theology? When and how is it appropriate or inappropriate to invoke the name of God in the public life of a nation?

Chapter 10: Blessed are the Peacemakers -- Winning without War

The questions today are how to resolve conflicts in the world, how to reduce violence, and how to heal the causes of war. Real peacemaking can develop initiatives and instutitions that could become alternatives to war.

- Describe and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the traditional Christian doctrines of pacifism and just war. Can nonviolence answer the questions that violence purports to answer, but in a better way

- Can the role of law and policing in protecting our neighborhoods be effectively applied to the international situation?

Chapter 11: Against Impossible Odds -- Peace in the Middle East

Resolving the ongoing crisis in the Middle East is an essential step toward addressing a major cause of violence in that region.

- What is the relationship between Palestinian violence against Israel and the Israeli occupation of Palestine? Is a two-state solution with a secure Israel and a viable Palestine likely to resolve the issues involved

- How are nongovernmental peacemaking organizations making a difference?

Chapter 12: Micah's Vision for National and Global Security

Micah's vision is of swords being beaten into plowshares, nation not making war against nation, and every person having their own vine and fig tree where no one shall make them afraid.

- What do you think is the relationship between poverty and terrorism? How can we go deeper to deal with the root causes of war?

- Can you think of any modern-day Micahs in your community who are effectively addressing issues of violence and poverty?

Chapter 13: The Poor You Will Always Have With You? --- What Does the Bible Say About Poverty?

Several thousand verses in the Bible speak to poverty and God's response to injustice, yet too many affluent Christians have no relationship with people in poverty.

- What is your response to the text from Matthew 25? How can we restore the integrity of the Word of God to our lives, our congregations, and our communities?

Chapter 14: Poor People Are Trapped --- In the Debate over Poverty

Republicans look after their wealthy constituencies, and Democrats want to be the champions of the middle class. Neither makes the needs of the poor a priority, and poor people are trapped in the debate.

- What would a solution-based approach to overcoming poverty look like? What can each sector of society contribute?

- What is the relationship between personal and social responsibility?

Chapter 15: Isaiah's Platform --- Budgets Are Moral Documents

The budget of a family, church, city, or nation reveals its true priorities --- what it cares about and values. Current U.S. federal budgets are sacrificing the poor for war and tax cuts.

- What is your reaction to the story of the 2003 child tax-credit debate in Washington and the exclusion of poor working families from that credit?

- Is it "class warfare" to talk about growing economic disparities and those in poverty who are being left out of America's economy?

Chapter 16: Amos and Enron --- What Scandalizes God?

America's corporate scandals are raising new questions about the relationship between the bottom line and the common good.

- Should our behavior in the economic spheres of our lives become the substance of adult Sunday School curricula and Bible study groups?

- Could a religious populism raise hard questions about corporate responsibility, tax policy, campaign financing, and budget priorities that political leaders couldn't afford to ignore?

Chapter 17: The Tipping Point --- Faith and Global Poverty

For the first time in history we have the information, knowledge, technology, and resources to bring the worst of global poverty to an end. What we don't have is the moral and political will to do so. And it is becoming clear that it will take a new moral energy to create that political will.

- What is the relationship between debt, aid, and trade? How would debt cancellation, wise aid programs, and trade justice lead to reducing global poverty?

- How are the churches addressing the moral challenge of the AIDS crisis?

Chapter 18: A Consistent Ethic of Life --- Abortion and Capital Punishment

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago coined the phrase "a seamless garment of life," linking the "life issues" of abortion, euthanasia, capital punishment, nuclear weapons, poverty, and racism all as critical components of a consistent ethic of life.

- What is your view of how both Republicans and Democrats speak to the issue of abortion? What has either done to seriously reduce the number of abortions?

- How could our affirmation of "a culture of life," serve to bring us together across ideological and political battle lines? And even more importantly, how can the precious gift of life be protected and preserved?

Chapter 19: Truth-Telling About Race --- America's Original Sin

Wallis names racism as America's "original sin." That original sin has affected most everything about our nation's life ever since. Slavery and subsequent discrimination against black people in America are injustices of such magnitude that one would think national repentance and reparations would be called for. But neither has ever come.

- What do you think of proposals for an apology for slavery? Would it lead to greater healing and racial reconciliation?

- What are the economic roots of racism? Who benefits and who loses because of racism?

Chapter 20: The Ties That Bond --- Family and Community Values

The strength and health of the bonds between family and community are essential to the common good. Reestablishing a spiritual sense of community in our churches, neighborhoods, and our national politics is an urgent need.

- What are the challenges facing parents and families today? Is there a relationship between "family values" and economic realities? How would strengthening parenting and families help contribute to a healthier society

- Do you believe that the long-standing and deeply rooted concept of marriage as being between a man and a woman should not be changed, but that same-sex couples should be granted full legal rights in civil unions, or that only same-sex gay marriage fulfills the requirements of equal protection under the law? Discuss the religious and public policy basis of your answer.

Chapter 21: The Critical Choice --- Hope or Cynicism

Prophetic faith does not see the primary battle as the struggle between belief and secularism. It understands that the real struggle of our times is the fundamental choice between cynicism and hope. And the decision for hope is based upon what you believe at the deepest levels --- what your most basic convictions are about the world and what the future holds --- all based upon your faith.

- What are some things that give you hope? What does it mean to be a "prisoner of hope?"

Epilogue: We Are the Ones We've Been Waiting For

- Why are "we" the ones we have been waiting for? Do you have the faith and hope that the world can be changed into a more just and peaceful place?

Author Bio

Jim Wallis is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller GOD'S POLITICS, which electrified Americans disenchanted with how the Right had co-opted all talk about integrating religious values into our politics by offering an alternative voice. Wallis is a leading figure at the crossroads of religion and politics in America today, the author of eight books, and the founder of Sojourners, a global faith and justice network. He is a public theologian, an internationally renowned speaker and preacher, a faith-based activist, husband, and father to two young boys, and a Little League baseball coach.

Critical Praise

"Wallis provides a refreshing alternative voice to the polarizing rhetoric currently popular."

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