relatively new feature in evangelical circles is a fusion of two currents. One is the long standing Anabaptist/pacifist/nonviolent stream of Christianity often embodied in the Amish, Hutterites, and Old Order Mennonites. Historically these groups have tended to concentrate on seeking to create and model a Christian society within their own community as a sign to the world of God’s Kingdom. More recently, especially through the writings of John Howard Yoder and, later, Stanley Hauerwas, John Milbank, and others, their views have shaped a wider audience, though one that is still disproportionately present largely in academic circles.

The other stream is supplied by varieties of new left politics, stemming from campus political upheavals in the 1960s and early 1970s. Many of these movements were marked not merely by a critique of America—after all, all sane people have criticisms of America—but by a sense that America was somehow, deep in its bones, fundamentally wrong.

While the “Christian Left” in the United States is, like the “Christian Right,” more varied than its critics often allow, much of it, especially the evangelical left, is marked by a fusion of these two currents.

This fusion has produced much to admire. Because of its Anabaptist suspicion of government, it is usually opposed to the secularizing tendencies that, in America, unlike Europe, are currently usually found on the left. Much modern American legal doctrine has interpreted the First Amendment to mean that everything government touches must be made religion free, hence, when governments are deeply involved in society, as all modern governments are, society must become religion-free. The evangelical left usually resists such rampant secularization.

Two other noteworthy features are its stress on the centrality of the poor in the Bible and its commitment to direct care for the poor. While it may want additional government social programs, generally the evangelical left calls on the church to work directly with those in need. This is one of its major virtues.

However, these streams do not run together easily. Anabaptists have tended to view the State not merely with political suspicion, as all wise people do, but with theological suspicion—as a “Caesar,” opposed to Christ, to be addressed prophetically or else shunned. The new left, while suspicious of military and
police power, has in leftist fashion frequently called for extensive government action. I was once on a panel with a representative of this view who invoked the common trope of equating government in Romans 13 with the Beast in Revelation 13, and hence denounced “Caesar” as, basically, the Antichrist. Later, he called for a national health insurance plan, apparently oblivious of the fact that calling on the Antichrist to monopolize health care funding would be, to say the least, theologically and otherwise problematic.

God’s Politics
While recognizing that the evangelical left is diverse, it is worthwhile to focus on its currently most visible representative, Jim Wallis, whose work well illustrates its strengths and weaknesses. His recent book God’s Politics topped the best-seller lists, received laudatory profiles in the New York Times and elsewhere, and he has been appropriated by many Democratic pols to try to help solve their electoral religion gap.

While Wallis shares the virtues noted above, his politics is often, to use another word with many meanings, “fundamentalist.” What I mean here is that he moves too quickly from an often isolated biblical text to a political prescription without addressing the entirety of the biblical story and with apparent disregard for two millennia of careful and thorough Christian reflection on these issues. (The same is true of many theological liberals, who sometimes appear to believe that God and the Bible have an indubitably clear position on drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge or federalism and welfare reform. The Christian Right is similar but believes that God has opposite views on these matters.) As a result, his work has little theology, less political theory, and almost no politics.

Lack of Theology
One example of lack of theology is the move from the forgiveness of debts required in Israel’s Sabbah and Jubilee years to current programs for the forgiveness of Third World debt. I have much sympathy for such debt reduction if applied circumspectly, but it is a stretch from Israel’s doings in the Bible. Israel’s Jubilee was to be the response of a community explicitly covenanted with God in the ordering and reordering of its internal affairs. It was explicitly a liturgical act of remembrance of Jahweh’s deliverance of Israel and was thus announced and begun on the Day of Atonement, when Israel celebrated God’s forgiveness of its own debts. Similarly, it was to be followed by two years in which Israel did not plant crops, a sacrifice to symbolize Israel’s total dependence on God. The Jubilee and Sabbath certainly have implications for current policies on debt—they show, for example, that no debts, or crimes, are absolute obligations to be repaid come what may (a realization that has shaped U.S. bankruptcy laws). But they are no blueprint for government policy on Third World debt, especially if, for example, such forgiveness gave a new lease on life to thugs such as Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe.

Also, if Israel’s life is considered normative for us in economics so that we can use its debt practices as a guide for current public policy, then why not do so in other areas as well? Should we wage holy war as in Joshua? Should we kill adulterers and idolaters? I’m sure Wallis would advocate none of these. But then he needs to give some reason why we should follow some practices and not others.

He does give some theological reflection on non-violence but, on other matters, almost nothing—no consideration of Irenaeus, Gelasius, Augustine, Thomas, Calvin, Luther, Wesley or Kuyper, or, more recently, Jacques Maritain, Reinhold Neibuhr, Paul Ramsay, or Oliver or Joan O’Donovan. Obviously, no popular book should be weighed down with ponderous theological reflection, but it should show some sign of having considered such reflection.

For example, Wallis writes, “The place to begin to understand God is with the prophets.” There is no wisp of an argument justifying this unusual contention. He never asks why the Bible does not begin with the prophets, but with Genesis. He never mentions that the majority of Christian reflection on politics has
begun with Genesis. He never carefully relates what the prophets say to the Torah, hence acknowledging that they challenge their rulers on the basis of God’s law, not on their own feelings of injustice. Maybe most of the church has been wrong for two millennia on how it addresses politics; it has certainly been wrong on other things. But Wallis never says why. He simply asserts a novel doctrine as indubitable fact.

Lack of Political Theory

*God’s Politics* concentrates on describing problems in society that the state is then presumed to be required to act on or to “solve.” Contrary to most reflection in the Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, and Protestant (including Anabaptist) traditions, Wallis does not discuss a Christian view of the nature of government itself. Like all too many on the Christian Right, he seems to selectively adopt pragmatism as a guide and so portrays government simply as a means to solve whatever problems or create whatever social goods he likes.

In contrast, most Christian political thought has emphasized that, in a state of sin, government is often a coercive agent—it threatens violence to enforce its provisions (think about what would happen if there were no penalty for tax evasion)—and that this necessarily shapes and limits the range of things it can and should do. Hence governments, being dangerous, should have a carefully specified role. Instead of delineating this role Wallis focuses on social problems. For example, he states that the Bible says more about God’s concern for the poor than it does about many concerns higher on current Christian political agendas. He is right, but so what? In politics the question is not what God cares about per se but what the proper government response is.

In his discussion of peacemaking, Wallis stresses the worthy goals of cultural sensitivity and genuine listening to the other. But he writes as if no political order has realized this before, as if “peacemaking” were somehow a new concept in foreign policy. In fact, the U.S., like most countries, has always recruited talented people skilled in others’ language and culture, assiduously trained them in the arts of understanding, negotiation, compromise and, in short, peacemaking, and made them our major means of relating to other countries. We call them diplomats, their office the State Department, and their boss the Secretary of State, the number three in the U.S. government. There may be problems in the State Department, but to act as if governments never give priority to peacemaking is simply ridiculous.

Lack of Politics

By politics I mean government acts and policy in a world where, inter alia, others oppose what we do, domestically and often democratically, and also internationally. But, because it focuses almost exclusively on the prophets, *God’s Politics* tends to neglect the practice of politics and those who are actually called to make political decisions.

The prophets are important to politics, but usually as divinely inspired critics of judges, kings, or elders, such as Moses or David, who held political office. This role is vital, but it cannot substitute for politics itself. The great German sociologist Max Weber suggestively described the prophets as the forerunners of a free press. In taking the prophets as his role model, Wallis emphasizes this outsiders’ role, elevating the journalist over the politician. But, while journalism can be wonderful (I have committed journalism myself) it is no substitute for government.

Regarding South Africa, Wallis focuses on Archbishop Desmond Tutu’s role. Tutu is worth citing; I have known him for 30 years and, despite recent loopy statements on international affairs, his role, especially in South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, has been a worthy one. But why not also discuss those other two South African Christian Nobel Peace Prize winners, Nelson Mandela and F.W. De Klerk, who not only denounced
apartheid but also then led a bitterly divided country through the painful compromises required for an actual peaceful transfer of power? They did the real slogging work of politics. Mandela followed this up with the even more difficult political task of leading the country through the minefields of its fractious early years. Why then focus on Christian clergy rather than Christian politicians?

Further afield, leaving aside the Calvinist shapers of the Red Cross and the Geneva and Hague Conventions on the laws of war, two of the last century’s major political programs were the United Nations and the European Union. As the late John Humphreys, the secretary of the drafting commission of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has pointed out, the declaration was produced by “a debate between the communists and the Catholics, with the communists a very poor second.” Those Catholics deserve the attention of anybody addressing modern politics. The Christian Democratic movement in Europe and Latin America is arguably the twentieth century’s most successful political enterprise. Through Konrad Adenauer, Robert Schuman and Jean Monnet, it produced the European Union. Whether or not we like what the UN and the EU have become, we cannot understand the modern world without addressing their contributions.

Similarly, rather than highlight the efforts of those outside the political arena, why not address, say, Martin Lee, leader of Hong Kong’s democratic opposition or, another Nobel Peace Prize winner, Kim Dae-Jung, the first real democratically elected leader of South Korea. He described, on NPR no less, how, when the Korean CIA had him weighted with chains to throw him out of a boat to drown, he had a vision of Jesus reassuring him he would live, then heard American helicopters coming to his rescue. These examples could be multiplied from Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The contemporary world is full not only of external “prophets” but of thoughtful, courageous, Christian politicians. We may agree or disagree with their policies, but we cannot ignore their example.

Confusion about War

In Wallis’ discussion of the lead-up to the Iraq war, his lack of discussion of politics comes most to the fore. His policy called for “an international tribunal to indict Saddam Hussein and his top officials for war crimes and crimes against humanity.” This might have been worth doing. But Wallis adds, “This would send a clear signal to the world that [Saddam Hussein] has no future.” But he gives no reason why this would be so. Saddam received many international condemnations and, left to his own devices, no doubt could have survived many more.

Wallis adds, “As we have seen in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, such tribunals can discredit and even destroy criminal regimes.” But in Yugoslavia and Rwanda, such tribunals did nothing to end the regimes. Milosevic is now on trial in The Hague because President Clinton, to his credit, with no UN authorization, waged war until Serbia stopped its massacres in Bosnia and Kosovo. In Rwanda, the UN and the United States did nothing—see, for all its Hollywood faults, the excellent movie Hotel Rwanda. The tribunals came later, only after Tutsi armies, through toil and blood, through war, with no UN authorizations, drove out the genocidal Hutu militias.

Conclusion

It is important for the Church, America, and the world, that we have good, popular Christian reflection on the nature and purpose of politics in our time. A thoughtful evangelical left could help in this. But Wallis, unfortunately, imitates the fundamentalist streak in the Christian Right and, ignoring substantive historic political theology and political theory, fails to elucidate a Christian approach to politics.