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Book Report

God's Politics Why The Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It by Jim Wallis

Jim Wallis addresses the question of faith *and* politics, versus faith *or* politics. The inclusion of faith allows a voice, spiritually-inspired, prophetic, to be heard in an arena that could and should have a moral compass (p. xiv). While instructive and informative, Wallis takes some critical shots aimed not only at the public square, but the church as well. Tying in a social witness with the practice of politics, this book identifies, describes and analyzes the distinctive elements of “taking back the faith” in the modern context in order that a relevance is maintained. Wallis’ main argument is that religious congregations are not meant to be social organizations that merely reflect the wider culture’s values, but dynamic countercultural communities whose purpose is to reshape both lives and societies. “We can demonstrate our commitment to pluralistic democracy and support the rightful separation of church and state without segregating moral and spiritual values from our political life (7).” By combining personal and social responsibility to construct the common good, Wallis argues that separation, polarization and competition of the two leaves spirituality without a social consequence, and a politics with no soul. Thus claiming, a political discourse that is disconnected from moral values quickly degenerates.

The question then becomes, how do we change our public life with the religious values that many hold dear? And how do we connect, what Wallis calls, “a genuinely prophetic spirituality” to the urgent need for social justice? Wallis begins this search by stressing the significance of two points – one, in politics, the best interest of the country is served when the prophetic voice of religion is heard, challenging both Right and Left from consistent moral ground; and two, in truth, most of the important movements for social change in America have been fueled by religion, progressive religion. Wallis states,

“Neither religious nor secular fundamentalism can save us, but a new spiritual revival that ignites deep social conscience could transform our society. Movements do change history, and the strongest ones are those with a spiritual foundation.” Without question, this colors his perception of the Christian gospel and redefines his understanding of the activity of its followers.

Interesting points:

- “You change a society by changing the wind.” Change the wind, transform the debate, recast the discussion, alter the context in which political decisions are being made in order to change the outcomes.
- “Vision leads directly to values.” The lack of vision in public life and emptying out of values that visionless leadership creates lead to a politics of complaint. Moral cohesion unravels, social values crumble, public policies lose their connection to the common good, families lose stability, neighborhoods lose community, leadership loses integrity, poor families and children begin losing everything – and complaint becomes the dominant political discourse.
- “God is personal, but never private.” If God is not personal, there is little meaning to faith. It merely becomes a philosophy or a set of teachings from religious figures who have passed on. Without a personal God, there is no personal dimension to belief. There is no relationship to God, no redemption, salvation, grace, or forgiveness. There is no spiritual transformation without the personal God, and no power that can really change our lives beyond mere self-improvement. And if this remains private, how can it extend beyond the individual?

What I found insightful from a Black, cultural perspective, was the topic of protest. In a manner of speaking, it was a great explanation of what has historically been a method in many cultures – oppressed, minority, Black, or otherwise. But it also pointed to the dangers and pitfalls of going the well too often – “The aim of effective and transformational protest should be to illumine a society to its need for change. In other words, protest must be instructive to succeed, more than destructive. It should, at its best,

point the way to an alternative, rather than just register the anger of its demonstrators. Protest must not become just a ritual of resistance, offering a laundry list of grievances...In other words, the best protest is not merely countercultural, it is transformational.”

In closing, Wallis talks about the significance of truth-telling. In dealing with and in politics, religion, and society as a whole, the need for truth is essential. I would contend that should serve as a foundation for this movement. Our need to join together should, in fact, must begin with our being honest with one another. I really appreciated that Wallis challenged Christians as a whole to realize their membership in the communal body of Christ – not just Blacks, Whites; Catholics, Lutherans; Evangelicals, Conservatives. Though we all as Christians may bring a different experience to the table because of our social, cultural, and economic backgrounds, we should never forget that we are part of a larger whole. Political and religious talk that focuses exclusively on the narrow purview of one experience alone will never be sufficient to speak to the broad range of human existence that is more than but not other than the multifaceted situations in a pluralistic society.