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Richard Crane
Messiah College, rcrane@messiah.edu

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**ECCLESIAL FAITHFULNESS, CHRISTIAN POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT, AND
THE RECOVERY OF THE APOCALYPTIC THEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION
OF JIM WALLIS'S *THE CALL TO CONVERSION***

Richard Dean Crane

ABSTRACT

Jim Wallis's *The Call to Conversion* features an apocalyptic theological imagination with an ecclesiological focus. The church is entrusted with the communal mission of making visible the intrusion of the reign of God in Jesus Christ. The thesis of this essay is that *The Call to Conversion* is a better resource for Christian political engagement than Wallis's more recent book, *God's Politics*, which is characterized by a turn toward a "public church" social ethic. The accent has shifted to the formation of a larger political movement seeking social change primarily through congressional lobbying. Wallis's error is the extent to which he has pinned his hopes on the institutions of American democracy. *The Call to Conversion* helps us recover an account of political engagement flowing from local ecclesial witness. Sheldon Wolin, Romand Coles, and other political theorists, provide support for approaches to political engagement that begin with local struggles for justice.

Jim Wallis's *God's Politics* is an extremely important book. He has accomplished what few authors achieve: to reach and mobilize a popular audience. Wallis's vision has come to represent, for many American Christians, the most viable alternative to the Religious Right for Christian political

engagement. However, one of the enigmas of *God's Politics*² is its unstable oscillation between an apocalyptic theological imagination, including a radical reformation ecclesiology,³ and a “public church” social ethic, in which the church’s “public” witness is virtually equated with the task of contributing to the common good through participation in the wider societal debate.⁴ Perhaps the most significant problem is the extent to which the book pins Christian hope for impacting society on conventional political activism, in particular lobbying Congress and seeking social change through better legislation. This instability within Wallis’s thought, it will be argued, is not merely a creative tension. These two strands within his thought are, in the final analysis, incompatible with one another.

The instability produced by Wallis’s endeavor to graft something like a public church model of political engagement onto an apocalyptic ecclesiological imagination provides a fertile field for theological reflection on these issues. The goal of this essay will be to set forth the broad outlines of a constructive proposal for understanding the political task of the church and faithful ecclesial witness in our context. It will be argued that a better resource for imagining ecclesial faithfulness is Wallis’s 1981 book, *The Call to Conversion*.⁵ This book articulates an apocalyptic soteriological and ecclesiological imagination in which the church is construed as a political entity in its own right, inaugurated by Christ to embody and perform publicly the eschatological new reality that is the reign of God. The central argument of this essay is that a retrieval of the apocalyptic soteriological and ecclesiological imagination of this book provides resources for the task of articulating a model of ecclesial political engagement in which the Christian community is not positioned as a sub-system within the larger social system of American democracy, but, rather, seeks to be true to its

2. The same instability characterizes Wallis’s most recent book. Jim Wallis, *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America* (New York: HarperOne, 2008). One of the limitations of this essay is the fact that it was almost complete when *The Great Awakening* was published. Time and space have not allowed a sufficient engagement with this text in this essay. However, this book brings into bold relief the enigma and tension discussed in this essay. The third chapter of the book re-asserts a strong apocalyptic theological imagination, reminiscent of *The Call to Conversion*, while other portions of the book resemble a “public church” social ethic.

3. A radical reformation ecclesiology, in the words of Arne Rasmussen, places the accent upon the politics of the church as an alternative polis which stands in stark contrast to existing social and political systems. Arne Rasmussen, *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (Lund, Sweden: Lund University Press and Bromley, Kent: Chartwell-Bratt, 1994), 17, 83.

4. Kristin E. Heyer, “Bridging the Divide in Contemporary U.S. Catholic Social Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 66, no. 2 (2005): 404–5.

5. Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

own identity and mission as the “annunciation and performance of a new order inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Christ.”⁶

However, even though accusations of sectarianism have often caricatured thinkers within an apocalyptic trajectory such as Stanley Hauerwas, an apocalyptic theological imagination does indeed exert a certain pressure toward ecclesiological models that posit a sharp antithesis between church and world and make it difficult to conceptualize how the church might have a positive and creative impact on the cultures and social orders in which it finds itself. Wallis’s activism and concern for “the least of these” positively inspires my effort to avoid falling into the trap of ecclesial withdrawal from genuine struggle for justice, peace, and better social and economic arrangements for “the least of these.” Therefore, this essay will seek to hold together an apocalyptic theological imagination and an account of the political task of the church with a different accent than the “public church” dimension within Wallis’s reflections. It will be briefly suggested that certain pneumatological insights provide resources for affirming a strong apocalyptic emphasis on the discontinuity between the reign of God and human social orders, including a sharp critique of the modern nation-state and the postmodern regime of global capitalism, while simultaneously recognizing “continuities,” openings, and possibilities for the transforming work of the Spirit at multiple points of ecclesial engagement with a world that, while fallen, remains the site of the Holy Spirit’s presence and action.

An Initial Summary of the Project of *God’s Politics*

Wallis’s goal is to initiate a faith-based, progressive political movement that will reshape American society through conventional forms of political engagement. His priorities include concern for the poor and economically vulnerable, racial reconciliation, care for the environment, gender equality, a bias for peacemaking and conflict resolution, and a consistent ethic of life. Wallis is “conservative” on issues of family values, sexual integrity, and personal responsibility, while being populist and progressive on economic issues. A consistent ethic of life means opposition to abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, weapons of mass destruction, genocide, and support for aggressive action to halt the global scourge of HIV/AIDS. Wallis is critical of television shows such as Fox’s *Temptation Island*, which celebrate infidelity, betrayal, and casual sex. Instead of separating personal morality

6. Eugene McCarragher, “‘The Most Intolerable of Insults’: Remarks to Christian Infidels in the American Empire,” in *Anxious About Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities*, ed. Wes Avram (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press), 111–12.

from social justice, he argues, persons on the cultural right and left should view both child poverty and *Temptation Island* as morally offensive. Wallis also contends that one can be pro-family without being mean-spirited and advocates legal protection for same-sex couples and civil rights for gay and lesbian persons. Above all, *God's Politics* shouts, "poverty is a religious moral values issue." Wallis calls for serious commitment to poverty reduction as a public policy priority in budget decisions, tax policies, and government initiatives to provide adequate nutrition for children from impoverished families, access to health care, and improve the nation's education system.⁷

Recovering *The Call to Conversion*

Douglas Harink judges *God's Politics* to be a paradigmatic display of Stanley Hauerwas's complaint that "'the subject of Christian ethics in America is America' and how to sustain the moral resources of American society."⁸ Who, Harink asks, is Wallis's congregation? Statements such as "how does a *nation* of endangered souls recover an authentic faith that is true to the gospel?" indicate that the assembly of "God's people" addressed by Wallis is not Christians who live in the United States, but the nation itself. He charges that Wallis has reduced the church's "public" role to an instrumentalist one. The end which Christian values are made to serve is the greater whole that is the nation. "All discourse about God, faith, and the church is thoroughly co-opted into the project of making America a better nation."⁹

7. In addition to the book's critique of the Bush economic and domestic agenda, in particular, cuts in social programs combined with tax cuts that largely benefited the wealthiest Americans, Wallis was critical of the Iraq war and the administration's endorsement of primarily military solutions to terrorism, including unilateral and preemptive war. The book includes a sharp polemic against the Religious Right's close alignment with the Bush administration. Wallis contends that the neo-conservative doctrine that global peace and security are best secured by US military supremacy has been underwritten by a "theology of empire," endorsed by many evangelical Christians, that locates America unambiguously on the side of God and divinely appointed to rid the world of evil. Wallis contends that this religious nationalism has linked the cause of Christ and the national interests of America. Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets It Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005), xviii, xxiii–xxiv, 3–7, 11–15, 48, 58–9, 74–5, 82, 100–3, 119, 141–2, 157, 189, 223–5, 297, 303, 321–4.

8. Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 36; original emphasis. Douglas Harink, "Response to Jim Wallis' *God's Politics: A New Vision for Faith and Politics in America*" (Unpublished paper delivered in the Theology and Religious Reflection Section, American Academy of Religion, Washington, DC, November 2006).

9. Wallis, *God's Politics*, 3, original emphasis; Harink, "Response to Jim Wallis' *God's Politics*."

In light of this critique, it is surprising to discover that Harink's *Paul Among the Postliberals* and Wallis's *The Call to Conversion*¹⁰ display remarkable agreement in their respective accounts of salvation as: (1) deliverance from idolatry and the enslaving principalities and powers; (2) participation in the reign of God through; (3) incorporation into the body of Christ. Both books feature an apocalyptic soteriology and ecclesiology, with the church construed as a political entity in its own right as the community inaugurated by Christ to embody and perform publicly the new reality that is the reign of God.

An apocalyptic theological vision privileges the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as an interruptive event that inaugurates the reign of God in human history.¹¹ The gospel, Harink maintains, is the good news of God's radical and decisive invasion, in Jesus Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, of a *kosmos* in bondage. Salvation involves rescue from idolatry and the "principalities and powers," which include unjust social structures, dominant cultural values and ideologies, and idolatrous allegiances to one's nation or ethnic group. Salvation is simultaneously the inauguration of the "age to come" in the midst of the present order. Aligning his ecclesiology with John Howard Yoder, Harink contends that the establishment of a new socio-political order, the church, is part of the good news. The church's mission is to offer the world a living sample of the eschatological new creation in Christ by providing a visible display of community in which the destructive and disordering effects of the powers are undone. Christ's Lordship over the powers, and the liberation of God's people from their dominion, is embodied in communities that practice hospitality, feed the hungry, and reject violence, and in communal practices in which racial and economic differences are surmounted

10. Douglas Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2003); Jim Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

11. Nathan Kerr adds the insight that apocalyptic accentuates the transcendent otherness of God and God's reign and denies that the meaning of human can be identified with any imminent historical process. Nathan Kerr, *Christ, History and Apocalyptic: The Politics of Christian Mission* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 1, 9.

Protestant theologians who display this apocalyptic imagination or sensibility include John Howard Yoder, Stanley Hauerwas, Barry Harvey, and many of Stanley Hauerwas's students. See Charles Pinches, "Hauerwas and Political Theology: The Next Generation," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 36, no. 2 (2008): 513–42. William Cavanaugh, David Toole, and Michael Baxter, also students of Hauerwas, as well as William McCarragher, are among the Catholic thinkers who exemplify these characteristics. There are also apocalyptic tendencies among theologians who have identified with the Radical Orthodoxy movement, which originated, not in the US, but the UK. However, many American thinkers identified in some measure with Radical Orthodoxy are from the United States.

and every person, regardless of social status in the wider society, is valued and included. A further implication of an apocalyptic imagination is the expectation of significant discontinuity between reign of God and dominant social orders, economic systems, and institutions of governance in any context. Every nation, Harink asserts, is, in the first instance, “a power that enslaves human beings and makes us serve its ends,” “an idolatrous regime from which God comes to set his people free.” The cruciform church is the sociopolitical space where the new creation breaks into the present and inevitably conflicts with the dominant order as the church exposes the powers’ pretensions to ultimate allegiance.¹²

In *The Call to Conversion*, salvation is similarly construed as deliverance from idolatry and principalities and powers of death, including societal structures, nationalistic pride, racism, sexism, and militarism. These powers generate false ideologies that make our institutions seem good and right and render us morally blind to our complicity in systems that destroy human lives. Bondage to power, money, security, and nation has made us willing to destroy the entire world through nuclear war to protect our “way of life.” The “principalities and powers” also include idolatrous value systems and narcissistic lifestyles. Wallis laments American addictions to shopping, eating and our obsession with more, bigger, and better. Self-fulfillment, personal happiness, and individual advancement are our chief goals. Television functions as the spiritual formation of the powers. Our hearts, minds, values, and way of life are idolatrously shaped and molded through advertising and media saturation that whets our appetites for more, while blinding our eyes to the global consequences of our way of life.¹³

Salvation is simultaneously incorporation into God’s reign. This new social order inaugurated by Jesus will be an intrusion on any human social order and a scandal to its accepted wisdom. The reign of God overturns our assumptions about what is reasonable, normal, and responsible in our culture, which rejects what Jesus calls blessed and celebrates what Jesus commands us to avoid: money, ambition, and aggression. The priorities of the kingdom are antithetical to the ruling assumptions of our day, including idolatrous devotion to national security and limitless economic expansion.¹⁴

12. Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals*, 17–18, 22–3, 37, 60–1, 68, 110, 116–17, 126, 256–9; Harink, “Response to Jim Wallis’ *God’s Politics*.”

13. Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, 1, 4–9, 12, 16, 35–6, 95, 132–3, 168, 172–3 n. 9, 181.

14. Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, xii–xiii, 1, 4–9, 12, 16, 24–9, 35–6, 41–2, 48–9, 95, 132–3, 168, 172–3 n. 9, 181.

An evaluation of the United States through the lens of this theological vision inclines Wallis toward a harsh critique of the “American empire,” which is described as the leader of an international system dominated by wealthy nations, arranged to guarantee them the largest share of the earth’s goods, and as a system of domination which seeks to guarantee that we have our way in the world. “The free world,” Wallis argues, is anywhere American interests can operate freely, including dictatorships friendly to US interests but brutal to their own people. In nations that could be agriculturally self-sufficient, there is hunger and malnutrition because land has been devoted to cash crops for export to affluent nations.¹⁵

The mission of the church, Wallis suggests, is to oppose empire by incarnating the new social order inaugurated by Jesus as the first fruit, the pilot project, the seed of the new order that God intends for the entire creation. The primary political task of the church is to manifest God’s wisdom to the principalities and powers (Ephesians 3:9-10), providing living proof that the oppressive and divisive realities of the world need not hold sway. In a society that believes in the necessity of violence and an economic system that blesses greed and over-consumption, the church presents the world with another viable option, demonstrating that it is possible to share generously, relinquish violence, and reject the idols of security, money, and power. Christians cannot change the ways of the world unless we ourselves have been converted from those ways and are able to invite people into communal spaces where a concrete alternative has taken shape. Therefore, the priority is the church’s own internal politics and its call for the state or other institutions to act differently must flow from this alternative witness. The most important issue facing Christians, he argued, is not nuclear war or poverty, but the shape of the church’s life in the world. The problem with most statements from churches’ bodies is that they typically focus on what other people, the government or American citizens in general, should do. Writing during the Reagan administration, Wallis argued that the church has not yet clearly said that we will not cooperate in the arms buildup or participate in nuclear war. “Whatever we have to say to the

15. In a sharp critique of American foreign policy and the emerging globalized economy, Wallis asserts that “despite all the rhetoric about US generosity and foreign aid, the flow of the world’s resources is overwhelmingly one-way, from poor countries to rich countries. Multinational corporations invest heavily in poor countries for one simple reason: it is enormously profitable. In addition to cheap labor, the raw materials and energy resources required by the industrialized nations are often located in the poor countries. Our ‘right’ to those resources has been a clear assumption of US foreign policy...backed by the...threatened use of force.” Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, 44–5.

government,” Wallis argues, “must be based on what we have publicly committed ourselves to do and not to do.”¹⁶

The Call to Conversion was a lamentation over the mal-formation of American Christians, who frequently speak Jesus’ name while ignoring the content of his teaching and life. Part of the problem, he argued, is the reduction of the gospel to personal salvation and the neglect in evangelistic preaching of the Kingdom of God. Merely registering decisions for Christ produces a disastrous result: “saved” individuals who fit comfortably into the old order. Authentic conversion places disciples into conflict with the prevailing culture, while evangelicalism’s privatized gospel fails to recognize that the gospel undermines American racism, capitalism, and militarism.¹⁷

Public Church Social Ethics and Public Theology

In the last quarter of the twentieth century, numerous American theologians sought to address the privatization of religion in modern, secular society by articulating public theologies or advocating a vision of the “public church.” Martin Marty popularized the notion of the “public church” as a characteristic shared by Christians who wish to move religious belief away from a narrow concern with personal life in order to contribute to public virtue and the commonweal.¹⁸ Michael and Kenneth Himes suggest that the “public church” is characterized by: (1) respect for the reality of secularization, the legitimate autonomy of other social institutions; (2) acceptance of some responsibility for the well-being of the wider society; (3) commitment to work with other social institutions in shaping the common good of the society.¹⁹ “Public theology” has been defined as “an effort to discover and communicate the socially significant meanings of Christian symbols and tradition.”²⁰

There are risks associated with any effort to group together such a wide range of thinkers. Those who understood themselves in these terms were a diverse lot, theologically and politically. It is also crucial to acknowledge

16. Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, xvi–xvii, 65, 72, 103, 107–8, 117, 129–33, 140–5, quote on p. 103.

17. Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, xii–xiii, xviii, 18–20, 24–9, 32–6, 41–2, 87.

18. Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline, Evangelical, Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 16.

19. Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, OFM, *The Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology* (New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), 2.

20. David Hollenbach, “Editor’s Conclusion,” in David Hollenbach, Robin Lovin, John Coleman and J. Bryan Hehir, “Theology and Philosophy in Public: A Symposium on John Courtney Murray’s Unfinished Agenda,” *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 714.

that this identification of major characteristics of public theologies and public church social ethics is not simply descriptive, but is simultaneously a critical assessment of this theological project.²¹ With these caveats in mind, I will venture to identify several general tendencies within this broad trajectory of Christian thought.

First, one finds the tendency to assume a fundamental compatibility between the church's mission and the project of liberal and secular democracy. Dieter Hessel and James Hudnut Beumler celebrate the extent to which the "public witness" of mainline Protestants is linked with the Enlightenment project of liberal democracy.²² The conviction at the heart of the "Americanist" tradition in Catholic social ethics is that there is a fundamental harmony between Catholicism and the United States' political order.²³ Speaking more generally, Michael and Kenneth Himes assert that the "benign view of human nature in Catholic theology" leads to a benign view of human society, assumed to be a harmonious system of interaction and cooperation. The state, they argue, "arises naturally from the interaction of persons who create a variety of organizational mechanisms so that shared activities are encouraged and shared goods can be obtained."²⁴

Second, the church's "public" mission is construed as service to an allegedly larger, more all-embracing project: a more just America, liberal

21. There are, of course, Protestant and Catholic theologians who advocate a public church model or the project of "public theology." There is a different line of historical development and different debates that account for the development of these approaches among Roman Catholic thinkers, on the one hand, and within the trajectory of mainline Protestantism in the United States on the other. An effort to narrate or summarize these historical developments is beyond the parameters of this essay.

22. "Free press, majority rule, protected rights for minorities, freedom of belief and association, the rule of law, and the sovereignty of the people are all aspects of the social contract on which US churches depend and seek for others throughout the world." Dieter T. Hessel and James Hudnut-Beumler, "The Public Church in Retrospect and Prospect," in *The Church's Public Role: Retrospect and Prospect*, ed. Dieter T. Hessel (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 301–2.

23. The classical argument was made by John Courtney Murray. His intellectual heirs include J. Bryan Hehir, David Hollenbach, SJ, Michael Himes and Kenneth Himes, OFM and John Coleman, SJ, among others. John Courtney Murray, *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960).

24. Himes and Himes, *The Fullness of Faith*, 23, 38. According to McBrien, "society is a gathering of various communities that are ordered for cooperation and communication so as to enhance human well-being. Society is composed of many different and diverse communities and groups: families, voluntary associations, colleges/universities, small businesses, corporations, labor unions, religious organizations, and even governmental agencies." Richard P. McBrien, *Caesar's Coin: Religion and Politics in America* (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 25; cited by Himes and Himes, *The Fullness of Faith*, 20.

democracy or the civic health of the nation. This is explicit in Richard John Neuhaus's contention that the Christian religion's *public role* is to construct a moral philosophy, a religiously inspired but publicly accessible language of political discourse in the service of the American experiment in republican democracy.²⁵ But the tendency to put the Christian faith in the service of a better or more just America is no less present in the thought of "public theologians" with left-leaning agendas.

If the church's "public" role is to contribute to the common good, the quality of public discourse in America, or the renewal of the public life of the nation, the church will be positioned as a sub-system in the service of American society.²⁶ The primary project is taken to be the civic life of the nation rather than the communal life of the church. For example, Michael and Kenneth Himes affirm Richard Bernstein's hopes that churches might play a crucial role in the service of American democracy. Though our civic life has been harmed by the pervasive individualism and narcissistic tendencies of American life, religious communities, Bernstein believes, provide the vestiges of community that are capable of fostering the type of public life *needed for a democracy*.²⁷ Similarly, David Hollenbach contends that:

A Christian public theology can appeal to symbols of community, human interdependence, and love...which *provide the kind of moral vision... American society is especially in need of today*.²⁸

25. Richard John Neuhaus, "The Catholic Moment," *National Review* (November 7, 1986), 46.

26. The Himes brothers assert that every part of society is responsible for fostering the common good. The state and other components of society, including the churches, each have their role to play in achieving the common good. Himes and Himes, *The Fullness of Faith*, 20, 23.

27. Bernstein's hope is that religious communities may serve to open a communal space where individuals might come together and engage in deliberation and form, debate, and test opinions. The Himeses agree, noting that in religious communities, individuals are schooled in a moral framework which helps them value the building up of the common good. In Michael Baxter's more negative judgment on the book, the primary agenda of *The Fullness of Faith* is to demonstrate how the "public church" provides a reservoir of symbols, themes and values that might serve to build up the public life of the nation. Richard Bernstein, "The Meaning of Public Life," in *Religion and American Public Life: Interpretations and Explorations*, ed. Robin Lovin (New York/Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 44, 47; Himes and Himes, *The Fullness of Faith*, 7-8; Michael J. Baxter, "Review Essay: The Non-Catholic Character of the 'Public Church'," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 248. For a similar line of argumentation, see also John A. Coleman, sj, "A Possible Role for Biblical Religion in Public Life," in "Theology and Philosophy in Public: A Symposium on John Courtney Murray's Unfinished Agenda," ed. David Hollenbach, sj, *Theological Studies* 40 (1979): 701-6; Robin Lovin, "Resources for a Public Theology," also in Hollenbach, ed., "Theology and Philosophy in Public," 707-10.

28. The italics are mine. Hollenbach, "Editor's Conclusion," 713.

Third, public church social ethics is characterized by an inclination to craft an ethic for society. For example, Max Stackhouse identifies the church's "public role" as the responsibility to represent and advocate a public theology as the normative basis for society and its institutions.²⁹ John Courtney Murray's project was to rehabilitate a shared consensus among Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and secularists on the foundational truths and values of the American experiment and thereby to contribute to a public philosophy for the nation.³⁰

Fourth, public theologies and a public church model feature a project of translation. It is impossible, in a short essay, to narrate the long and complex history that has informed our conceptions of what counts as public and as private.³¹ However, this project of translation is predicated upon a concept of "public" that has been increasingly called into question. Accepting the term "public" as inherited implies that the public realm is a sphere of neutrality and universality vis-à-vis all that is particular and parochial. In the 1970s and 1980s, many liberal political theorists in the

29. Max Stackhouse, "Public Theology and the Future of Democratic Society," in Hessel, ed., *The Church's Public Role*, 65, 74, 78, 82.

30. Himes and Himes, *The Fullness of Faith*, 11.

31. Numerous theologians, philosophers, and cultural and political theorists have suggested that the rise of the modern and secular nation-state has been accompanied by a tendency to "locate" religion to the sphere of the interior and private self. William Cavanaugh, John Milbank and Nicholas Lash provide suggestive and complementary accounts of the birth of the modern nation-state in sixteenth-century Europe as the victory of secular over ecclesial authority, which led to the elimination of the church from the public sphere. Religion came to be "positioned" in what was redefined as spiritual territory: the inside of the private, Cartesian self. According to John Milbank, the positioning of religion in the sphere of the private, interior self was correlative with the re-imagining of human society as a sphere of autonomous human construction and sheerly formal power. Society came to be seen as an autonomous, legally governed domain, obeying regular natural laws and completely transparent to rational understanding. Milbank argues that Max Weber best expressed the standard secularization thesis. Through the process of cultural rationalization, the West has arrived at the universal goal of separating out the religious domain as a separate value-sphere, a purely private matter. Weber defined the public realm, characterized by capitalism, formal law, and bureaucratization, as essentially and for all time, the formal organization of rational self-interest. Talal Asad contends that the modern "positioning" of religion in the sphere of the private, interior, personal and individual domain mirrors secular society's exclusion of religion from politics, law, and science. Nicholas Lash, "The Church in the State We're In," *Modern Theology* 13 (1997): 123; William T. Cavanaugh, "A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House": The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State," *Modern Theology* 11 (1995): 398–409; John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 9–48, 87–98, 104–6, 126–30; Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, MD and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 27–8, 39–42.

United States insisted that appeals to religious convictions undermine civil public discourse and are divisive in a pluralistic society since particularistic religious premises are not shared by all members of the society. They promoted an ideal of public reason that required participants to craft arguments without appealing to substantive religious convictions or comprehensive conceptions of human flourishing, which were deemed to be private and parochial, and, instead, to defend political viewpoints on the basis of principles, ideas, and beliefs broadly shared and acceptable to “common human reason.”³² Public theologians accepted these “ground rules,”³³ exemplified in paradigmatic fashion by Michael and Kenneth Himes’s identification of the fundamental problem as that of how “Christian theology, in all its *particularity*, can be accepted as *public* discourse in pluralistic America?”³⁴

Numerous strategies have been employed to accomplish this purpose. J. Bryan Hehir argued that the task of “projecting the perspective of the Church into the societal debate about normative questions of social policy” calls for exclusively philosophical language if we are to find solutions persuasive to a pluralistic public. Others claimed that Christian social ethics should serve as a mediating language which allows the *translation* of Christian convictions into secular philosophical language that, as Joseph Cardinal Bernardin argued, “can be accepted by a religiously

32. In recent years, most liberal theorists have conceded that the aspiration to transcend the particularities of history and tradition in order to ground all claims in a more basic, universal reason has been discredited. John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 14, 38, 137–8, 212–54; John Rawls, “The Domain of the Political and Overlapping Consensus,” *New York University Law Review* (May 1989): 243–4; Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), 10–15; Rawls, “‘Justice as Fairness’: Political not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 14 (Summer 1985): 229–48; Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 5, 10–12, 50–1, 54–9, 68–9, 216–17, 220, 228–9 n. 8; David Tracy, “Theology, Critical Social Theory, and the Public Realm,” in *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, ed. Don S. Browning and Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 21; Matthew Lamb, “Communicative Praxis and Theology: Beyond Modern Nihilism and Dogmatism,” also in Browning and Schüssler Fiorenza, *Habermas, Modernity, and Public Theology*, 111; David Tracy, “Particular Classics, Public Religion, and the American Tradition,” in Lovin, *Religion and American Public Life*, 118–19.

33. Himes and Himes, *The Fullness of Faith*, 4–5; Tracy, “Particular Classics, Public Religion, and the American Tradition,” 118–23, 126–9; John A. Coleman, *An American Strategic Theology* (New York/Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1982), 196; Robin W. Lovin, “Social Contract or Public Covenant,” in *Religion and American Public Life: Interpretations and Explorations*, ed. Robin W. Lovin (New York/Mahweh, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986): 133–4; Winston Davis, “Translating God-talk: Church, State and the Practice of Civility,” *The Christian Century* 111 (April 20, 1994): 418.

34. Himes and Himes, *The Fullness of Faith*, 15–16; emphasis mine.

pluralistic society as the moral foundation of public policy positions.”³⁵ Others argued that appeals to Christian beliefs and symbols *are* appropriate in public conversation if arguments must be constructed in such a way that non-religious persons can accept a theologian’s public proposals without acceptance of his or her religious premises. Christian beliefs or scriptural narratives might be proposed as illustrative stories, contributions to the history of human experience, aspects of the national heritage, or the cultural heritage of western society.³⁶ David Tracy argued that even though classic religious texts and symbols are “non-public” and non-shareable in their origins, their effects can be public if they disclose new ways of being-in-the-world or transformative possibilities for human existence. The assumption, Kathryn Tanner argues, is that Christians and non-Christians can share general humanistic understandings of the significance of Christian beliefs and symbols.³⁷ However, this strategy per-

35. J. Bryan Hehir, “The Perennial Need for Philosophical Discourse,” in “Theology and Philosophy in Public: A Symposium on John Courtney Murray’s Unfinished Agenda,” *Theological Studies* 40 (December 1979): 711; Joseph Cardinal Bernardin, “Address at Georgetown University,” *Origins* 14 (1984): 343.

36. In his positive assessment of the project of public theology, John Coleman celebrates Reinhold Niebuhr’s ability to appeal, not primarily to revelational warrant, but, rather, to the ability of biblical insights and symbols to convey a deeper human wisdom. Kathryn Tanner, in her negative assessment of this strategy, notes that the story of the Good Samaritan might be proposed, not in virtue of its authoritative status as part of the Christian community’s sacred scriptures, but as an evocative example of the regard for others that is a central tenet of almost every human society. Coleman, *An American Strategic Theology*, 194; Kathryn Tanner, “Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate,” in *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics*, ed. Harlan Beckley (Washington, DC: Society of Christian Ethics, 1996), 83–4.

37. When the public recommendations of theologians are presented in such a way that the most distinctive features of the Christian religion are minimized or bracketed so that someone who is not religious can make them as well, Kathryn Tanner argues, this strategy is indistinguishable from the position that religious arguments should be kept out of public debate altogether. Tanner, “Public Theology and the Character of Public Debate,” 83–4; Lovin, “Resources for a Public Theology,” 707; Lovin, “Social Contract or a Public Covenant,” in Lovin, *Religion and American Public Life*, 132–45; Tracy, “Particular Classics, Public Religion, and the American Tradition,” 115–16, 120–23, 126; Tracy, “Theology, Critical Social Theory, and the Public Realm,” 38–9; Himes and Himes, *The Fullness of Faith*, 18–19. David Hollenbach makes a similar move when he states that a public theology which addresses social issues in the symbolically rich language of Christian religion has great power to stimulate commitment and motivate action. But it is clear that this allegedly symbolically rich language has been detached from the “particularities” of the Christian tradition in order to be acceptable for public appearance. He notes that a Christian public theology can appeal to symbols of community, human interdependence, and love which provide the kind of moral vision which American society is especially in need of today. Hollenbach, “Editor’s Conclusion,” 713.

petuates the privatization of religion. Religious language is only allowed in public so long as it is detached from its “home” in the particularities of the Christian faith. What is allowed in public is an eviscerated version of Christian convictions that resonates with what the majority of the public already believes.

Finally, one finds a confidence that “we” are able, through the institutions of democratic governance, to construct a just and peaceful social order and that “we the people” really rule in a functioning democracy. At the heart of the “public church” ideal is the conviction that the church’s mission includes collaboration with the state and other secular actors through participation in public policy analysis and debates.³⁸ The urgent task taken up by Christian ethicists is not that of speaking to the Christian community, but, rather, addressing public policymakers and contributing to the formation of public policy.³⁹ For example, Dieter Hessel and James Hudnut-Beumler characterize the responsibility of the churches to develop a public witness to the nation as the development of a witness to policymakers at all levels of government, “designed to foster community rebuilding and justice-oriented federal policies.” “The challenge,” they argue, is “to make more of a public difference by specifying major societal needs illumined by Christian ethics, to project an alternative social vision and the policies to embody it in the United States.”⁴⁰

38. “A Catholic Troeltsch?: Curran on the Social Ministry of the Church,” in *A Call to Fidelity: On the Moral Theology of Charles E. Curran*, eds James J. Walter, Timothy E. O’Connell and Thomas A. Shannon (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 196. It is easy to see the compatibility between public theologies and a public church imagination and Ernst Troeltsch’s “church-type” of his well-known typology of church-society configurations. The “church-type” is characterized by an accommodationist approach to secular institutions and culture. The social function of the church-type is described by Troeltsch as integrative, legitimating, and conservative, with the church taking responsibility for collaborating with the institutions of the wider society and seeking to provide an ethic for the governance of society. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, vol. 2, trans. Olive Wyon (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1931), 993–4, 998–1002.

39. Ron Stone describes Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich, two of the most influential theologians of the previous generation, as public theologians because their message was directed to policy makers in public ways and not exclusively to the church. Their words were as much to politicians with the church overhearing them, as they were to the church with politicians overhearing them. Ron Stone, “Tillich and Niebuhr as Allied Public Theologians,” *Political Theology* 9 (2008): 504.

40. Dieter T. Hessel, “Making a Public Difference After the Eclipse,” and Hessel and Hudnut-Beumler, “The Public Church in Retrospect and Prospect,” in Hessel (ed.), *The Church’s Public Role*, 18, 307.

A Critique of *God's Politics* (and *The Great Awakening*)

God's Politics and Wallis's latest book, *The Great Awakening*, are characterized by an unstable oscillation between Wallis's apocalyptic imagination and a viewpoint much closer to a public church social ethic. While the primary focus in this section will be *God's Politics*, *The Great Awakening* is in significant continuity with *God's Politics* and helps illuminate features of the earlier book.

First, there is ambiguity concerning Wallis's audience and the "location" in which he has situated his argument.⁴¹ Often Wallis's rhetorical use of "we" and "us" refers to Christians and we find Wallis addressing his audience *as* fellow Christians.⁴² However, the audience constructed rhetorically through the words "us" and "we" is just as often American citizens in general. More often, *God's Politics* is situated as an *American* conversation about faith, values, politics, and how progressive religion might function in the public square for the sake of a better society. The goal of the book is to spark "a public conversation in this country over what the 'moral values' in politics should be."⁴³ Wallis identified the purpose of *God's Politics* as a challenge to *America* to take back *the* faith.⁴⁴ The primary accent is upon the civic and political life of the nation rather than the faithfulness of the ecclesial community in its engagements with the society.

Second, in spite of his best instincts, Wallis often assigns the Christian faith an instrumental role in the service of the "larger" project that is America. A few of the many statements⁴⁵ vulnerable to Harink's critique include:

41. Of course, one must keep in mind that many of the essays in *God's Politics* were previously published in *Sojourners* magazine or in other publications and these essays were addressed to different audiences in different contexts. However, the ambiguity I note in this paragraph is often present within the same essay.

42. For example, chapter one calls those who feel *our* faith has been subjected to public misrepresentation, to "take it back." Wallis notes that strident voices claim to represent Christians in the public arena, but they clearly don't speak for most of *us*. Chapter 9 includes a Christian *confessional* statement. Wallis, *God's Politics*, 3–4, 16–18.

43. Wallis, *God's Politics*, 3–4, 16–18, 47, 79, 109, 150–1.

44. Since he rarely indicates when he is addressing Christians and when he is speaking to American citizens in general, Wallis's rhetoric frequently blurs the line between the distinctive identity of Christians and the identity of American citizens in general. Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 4.

45. Page numbers for *God's Politics* will be indicated parenthetically. The italics are mine and are intended to emphasize features of Wallis's statements that are vulnerable to Harink's critique.

- In a deeply polarized country, ...the need for some kind of political healing and reconciliation...could be one of the most important roles for the religious community (xix–xx).
- In politics, the best interest of the country is served when the prophetic voice of religion is heard (18).
- Instead of insisting that religion is a private matter..., the Democrats should be arguing, on moral and religious grounds, that all Americans should have economic security, health care, and educational opportunity (59).
- The separation of church and state does not require banishing moral and religious values from the public square... America's social fabric depends on such values (59).
- All three sectors of a society need to be functioning well for its health and well-being: the private (market) sector, the public sector (government) and civil society (non-governmental organizations, nonprofits, and religious institutions). It is like a three-legged stool. Each sector has crucial roles to play.⁴⁶

His contention that “building that new America will require greater moral leadership from both Democrats and Republicans, from our religious communities and from each and every one of us”⁴⁷ reflects the public church model of societal engagement as a collaborative effort in which the church's public role is to serve the larger social system.

A third tension lies in the fact that *God's Politics* was written, in part, to contest the ground rules that would banish religious language from the “public realm.” Wallis employs distinctively biblical and Christian language, asserting that “the vision we put forward in this book for our contemporary society is simply the content of what the Old Testament prophets, Jesus, and the New Testament writers had to say—about our public commitments, our common life, and the social bonds we share in community.”⁴⁸ But at other points in *God's Politics*, and more emphatically in *The Great Awakening*, Wallis insists that Christians must “police” their use of explicitly religious language. Bringing faith into the *public square*, he argues, requires submission to the democratic discipline of making the case that policies and proposals advocated are better for the common

46. The final quote is from Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 70. This statement reflects a view of society as a potentially harmonious system with religious institutions “positioned” as a sub-system with a role to play in the service of the whole. It is not difficult to detect the similarity between this statement and the views of Michael and Kenneth Himes summarized above.

47. Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 98.

48. Wallis, *God's Politics*, 28, 71, 146.

good.⁴⁹ Religious convictions must be *translated* into “moral arguments” rather than argued as *sectarian* religious demands. Even if the “content” is derived from scripture, it must be translated into a non-religious moral idiom: “the common good.”⁵⁰

Fourth, Wallis seeks to offer an ethic for society. As noted above, Wallis proposes a vision *for our contemporary society*, the content of which is drawn from key portions of the Bible, but is translatable into the more generic moral language of the “common good.” This, he hopes, may provide an ethic for society compatible with our many faith traditions and one with secular roots as well.⁵¹

Fifth, the motif of apocalyptic discontinuity between the reign of God and American society is latent within *God's Politics*. Our situation is characterized as one in which faithfulness means resistance to “an empire holding absolute sway.” Since our society and politics are governed by values at odds with the Gospel, Wallis maintains, faithful Christian participation in the political arena will involve prophetic challenges that put us at odds with the dominant culture.⁵² In *The Great Awakening*, Wallis re-affirms his apocalyptic understanding of the Kingdom of God as a new social order that *utterly reverses* the logic of this world's kingdoms and political options, bringing a great reversal to the values, assumptions and norms of the world as we know them.⁵³

49. Wallis, *God's Politics*, xiv, xxiii–xxiv, 28, 60–1, 65, 68–77.

50. Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 27.

51. According to Wallis, “the common good as a political agenda could offer a clear and compelling vision for America's future.” Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 80–2, 90–1. Wallis's viewpoint profoundly resembles Robin Lovin's hopes for the idea of covenant, a biblical and theological concept that has become part of the patrimony of our society. Wallis entertains the notion that the ideal of the “common good” can elevate the quality of American public and political discourse, overcome the limitations of our endemic individualistic moral imagination, and motivate citizens to sacrifice for the sake of the commonweal. See Lovin, “Resources for a Public Theology.”

52. American Christians, Wallis argues, must choose whether to stand in solidarity with the international body of Christ and oppose the imperial pretensions of the Bush administration or act as if our highest loyalty is to our government. Wallis, *God's Politics*, 36, 97, 137–8, 150–1, 237. The apocalyptic motif rings loudly in Wallis's recent affirmation of Shane Claiborne and his intentional community's commitment to “the way of Jesus, the way of the kingdom, and the way of the cross,” and, therefore, to live in such a way that the sanity of the consumer culture, the distorted priorities of the global economy and the warfare state are called into question. Jim Wallis, “Foreword: A Manifesto for a New Generation,” in Shane Claiborne, *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 12.

53. Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 61–4.

When his apocalyptic imagination is at the forefront, Wallis affirms that a faithful church will be a prophetic minority, an alternative community whose life and witness are at odds with the dominant culture.⁵⁴ However, one finds, not merely a creative tension, but a fundamental contradiction in Wallis's last two books.⁵⁵ One cannot simultaneously believe that the intrusion of the reign of God is so disruptive that it brings a great reversal to the values, assumptions and norms of the world and also believe: (1) there is a moral consensus in America that is fundamentally compatible, or in continuity with, Christian values that provides a reservoir of moral resources for transforming society, and (2) that a mobilized democratic citizenry, working with and through the governmental institutions of representative democracy, can produce a just society.

Multiple rhetorical appeals to “our most deeply held values” accentuate this assumed continuity between Christian values and a moral consensus within the dominant culture. Wallis's contribution to *America's* public discourse, he asserts, will be to raise the public implications of the spiritual values *we* often claim to believe but ignore when it comes to politics.⁵⁶ A new politics of values, a consensus around the values of the common good, could “summon the best in the American people and unite us to solve the moral issues of our time.”⁵⁷

Wallis writes as if “we” are capable of exercising a significant degree of control over the direction of society. “When we move toward our prophetic and democratic visions,” he maintains, “slaveries are ended, civil rights achieved, freedom established, compassion implemented, justice advanced, human rights defended, and peace made.”⁵⁸ He is convinced that the moral consensus he seeks to articulate will “lead us to a new

54. Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 64–6.

55. Wallis indicates a latent awareness that there is at the very least an incredible tension in his thought in *The Great Awakening* when he states that he has Dorothy Day on one shoulder and Martin Luther King, Jr. on his other shoulder, both whispering in his ears and not always saying the same things. Day emphasized resistance to the powers that be and identified most of our problems as the result of “our acceptance of this filthy, rotten system.” King called for radical reform of the structures of injustice. Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 73.

56. Jim Wallis, with Church Gutenson and the editors of *Sojourners, Living God's Politics: A Guidebook for Putting Your Faith into Action* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 4; Wallis, *God's Politics*, xix–xx, 27–30, 75–8, 95.

57. Americans are much less concerned about what is liberal or conservative, Democrat or Republican, Wallis argues, than about what is right. Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 97.

58. Wallis asserts that “never has there been a clearer role for the churches and religious community. We can push both parties toward moral consistency and their best-stated values and away from unprincipled pragmatism and negative campaigning.” Wallis, *God's Politics*, xix–xx, xxiii–xxiv, 21–4, 27–30, 60–1, 65, 68–78, 95, quote on p. 28.

America...that reflects all our best values,” and is characterized by compassionate priorities and social justice.⁵⁹ This optimistic rhetoric presumes that “we” can, through the institutions of representative democracy provided by the nation-state, tame the militaristic tendencies of the empire and the excesses of capitalism and have a dominant voice in shaping our nation’s public policies.

Perhaps the most decisive factor tipping the balance point away from Wallis’s apocalyptic sensibilities and moving him closer to a public church social ethic is his goal of leading a faith-based, progressive political movement to reshape American society. His dream is to call into reality another viable option on the American political scene that would connect political discourse to moral and religious values, integrate personal ethics and social justice, and appeal to persons who are moderate to conservative on personal moral questions and progressive on social justice. The center of gravity has decisively shifted from the church as a counter-cultural community to an extra-ecclesial, progressive, national faith-based movement.⁶⁰

Apocalyptic Imagination, the Nation-State, and the State of American “Democracy”

Eugene McCarragher’s clarion call to American Christians reflects a radically different sensibility than a public church model:

59. Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 98.

60. Though this is beyond the limitations of this paper, it would be interesting to explore the ways in which the transformations within the Sojourners community and organization have influenced Wallis’s thought and action. The community began as an intentional, counter-cultural community seeking to model the alternative values of the Reign of God. According to Wallis, “the biblical metaphor ‘sojourners’ identifies God’s people as pilgrims, fully present in the world but committed to a different order.” The Sojourners community initially “lived together in common households, had a common purse, formed a worshipping community, got involved in neighborhood issues, organized national events on behalf of peace and justice and continued to publish the magazine.” The community initiated local ministries, such as the Sojourners Neighborhood Center, which ran after-school and summer programs for local children. This community went through multiple transitions until the break-up of the community due to serious theological differences, including disagreements over Wallis’s abiding commitment to a historic Christian orthodoxy. In 1995, Sojourners founded Call-to-Renewal to focus on poverty by uniting churches and faith-based organizations across the theological and political spectrum. In 2006, Sojourners and Call-to-Renewal re-united for the sake of greater efficiency in the use of resources and focus. It is quite likely that these changes have influenced Wallis and is where his focus has been at different points over the past thirty years. See “Mission,” http://www.sojonet.net/index.cfm?action=about_us.mission, and “Sojourners History,” http://www.sojonet.net/index.cfm?action=about_us.history. Ted Olson, “Interview: Where Jim Wallis Stands,” <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2008/may/9.52.html>.

It's time to realize that the American empire is a sacral order, a more beguiling and frightful incarnation of the earthly city described by Augustine in *The City of God*...the American imperium...worships a triune god of Caesar, Mammon, and Mars... Its boldest creedal statement is *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, which openly calls for the missionary (and, on occasion, "preemptive") extension of liberal democracy and corporate capitalism.⁶¹

McCarragher rejects any notion of a fundamental harmony between Christian faith and the United States' institutions of governance, whose real agenda, he contends, is to underwrite the global capitalist order. Like Wallis in *The Call to Conversion*, McCarragher also indicts the dominant culture in the United States as idolatrous and antithetical to Christian values.⁶²

One might suppose that such heightened rhetoric is in reaction to the extremes of the Bush administration. However, deep suspicion of the modern nation-state,⁶³ capitalism, the imperial pretensions of the United

61. McCarragher, "The Most Intolerable of Insults," 104. According to the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States*, there is one single sustainable model for national success: freedom, democracy, and free enterprise. Imposing corporate capitalism on an unwilling planet is a key priority, with ominous warnings to nations that "do not govern themselves wisely" by opening their societies to free markets and free trade.

62. According to McCarragher, the liberal-capitalist state exists to facilitate the contractual orchestration of a nihilistic freedom that is but the morally vacuous assertion of countless wills-to-power with no *telos* beyond autonomy. McCarragher describes capitalism in American culture as one embodiment of what Augustine described as *libido dominandi* because the fuel of this order is the desire to get richer all the time. Draped in the ideological garb of choice and freedom, the only deep conviction of broad segments of the American middle class is their inalienable right to do as they please. The result, from abortion and genome mapping to the willingness to wage war for the sake of US global power and open markets, is a culture of death. Without a shared conception of the good, this regime of capitalism forces its denizens to be morally empty and endlessly competitive in the struggle for the accumulation of power, whether in capital or weapons, because power confers the capacity for choice. McCarragher, "The Most Intolerable of Insults."

63. For example, Cavanaugh has argued that the origins of the modern, centralized, bureaucratized, and sovereign nation-state was hardly an expression of human sociality, but, rather, its historical emergence was inseparable from the desire of rulers for greater efficiency in the extraction of tax revenue from the population for the sake of military might and war-making and this process was accompanied by the destruction of local authorities and identities in favor of the nation-state as one's fundamental identity and loyalty. Writing polemically against public theologians like Charles Curran and others who have tried to rehabilitate the notion of "the common good" as a central feature of a renewed American public philosophy, he has also challenged the ideology of the nation-state as promoter and defender of the common good. He argues that the foundational anthropology of Lockean liberalism, which continues to shape our social imagination, depicts the sovereign individual as the natural condition of humankind. It cannot produce a political philosophy in

States, and of our dominant consumerist culture, can be found in the writings of Stanley Hauerwas, William Cavanaugh, Barry Harvey, Michael Baxter, and others long before 2001. In 1994, Barry Harvey penned these words:

the church must understand itself as the sign and foretaste of the messianic age, a community with the sacramental vocation of opening the world to its origin and destiny in the Kingdom of God. Therefore, the church and the world dominated by liberal capitalism should be construed as alternative and incommensurate disciplinary configurations, overlapping in many respects, but each striving to achieve different ends and affording very different possibilities for human existence.⁶⁴

Suspicion of all ruling powers will be a general tendency of a theological imagination informed by the category of apocalyptic. If the interruptive character and eschatological novelty of God's reign are emphasized, discontinuity between the church and any human social order will be accentuated. According to Michael Baxter, Christians should identify themselves most fundamentally as citizens of another *patria*, as strangers and aliens in this and all other nation-states through which they pass on their pilgrim journey.⁶⁵ What states do, after all, Michael Budde argues, is "exercise lethal force in the pursuit of various objectives—order, justice, prosperity, self-preservation, elite security... *Pax Romana*, or *Pax Americana*, or any other kind of peace purchased by state power, is one in which killing for some social good is legitimate and inevitable."⁶⁶ Stanley Hauerwas asserts that "the church does not exist to provide an *ethos* for democracy or any other form of social organization, but stands as a political alternative to every nation." In spite of frequent "rants" about liberalism, Hauerwas's conviction that the church is the only true polity, Michael Quirk argues,

which the state's role is to secure the common good. Locke's "commonwealth" is a society constituted for the procuring, preserving, and advancing of *individual* interests: life, liberty, and material possessions. The goal of this state is strictly to secure the non-interference of individuals with each other. William T. Cavanaugh, "Killing for the Telephone Company: Why the Nation-State is not the Keeper of the Common Good," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2 (2004): 245–9, 253–4, 258, 265. See also Cavanaugh, "A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House," 398–409.

64. Barry Harvey, "Insanity, Theocracy, and the Public Realm: Public Theology, the Church, and the Politics of Liberal Democracy," *Modern Theology* 10, no. 1 (1994): 30, 38, 44–7, 51, quote on p. 51; see also Barry Harvey, "The Body Politic of Christ: Theology, Social Analysis, and Bonhoeffer's Arcane Discipline," *Modern Theology* 13, no. 3 (1997): 340–1.

65. Baxter, "Review Essay," 254–5.

66. Michael Budde, *The (Magic) Kingdom of God: Christianity and Global Culture Industries* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1997), 145–6.

implies that any social order will be, in some measure, deficient from a Christian point of view.⁶⁷

Jim Wallis's primary focus recently has been the mobilization of activists to advocate legislation in support of social programs to uplift the poor, environmental protection, and foreign humanitarian aid. The accent has been placed upon the formation of a political movement that seeks social change primarily through lobbying Congress.⁶⁸ However, the *extent* of the hope Wallis has invested in an engaged and mobilized democratic citizenry, working through the institutions of the federal government, as the agent that will secure a just social order, is at odds with the apocalyptic strand in his own thinking. Though he is hardly naïve about the corruption of the American political process, Wallis's belief that "we the people" are still, in some measure, in control within a functioning participatory democracy is a matter of intense debate. According to political theorist Sheldon Wolin, real democracy is incompatible with the institutionalization of democracy by modern nation-states, which seek to separate their plane of sovereignty from the political power of citizens through highly sophisticated apparatuses of bureaucracy and self-perpetuating power-structures and place actual control in elitist hands. The "democratic" citizen is reduced to the status of voter, courted, manipulated, and allowed to appear in cameo appearances scripted by the political opinion-makers disguised as opinion-takers. American "democracy," he argues, is not really "representative democracy," but, rather, is based on various *representations of* democracy: public opinion polls, electronic town meetings, and elections. Wolin concludes that any conception of democracy grounded in the citizen-as-actor is incompatible with the modern choice of the state as the fixed center of political life and the corollary concep-

67. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 12. Michael Quirk, "Stanley Hauerwas' *Against the Nations*: Beyond Sectarianism," *Theology Today* 44, no. 1 (April 1987): 78–86; Hauerwas's statement reflects St. Augustine's conviction that any polity is defective where the true God is not worshipped.

68. "What We've Accomplished Together," SoJo Mail, December 13, 2007. A SoJo Mail email dated June 17, 2008 described the "Vote Out Poverty" campaign. For example, the goal of the "Vote Out Poverty" campaign was to make poverty a central issue in the 2008 election. A central strategy was the development of voter education to guide Christians along with efforts to encourage churches to feature an "election-based" Poverty Sunday. The 2009 National Mobilization Plan will feature a major event in Washington designed to attract media attention, a national *faith*-based constituency around a poverty platform and demand that elected officials take action through intensive lobbying efforts and a rally in front of the White House.

tion of politics as activity organized around a single dominating objective: control or influence over the State apparatus.⁶⁹

Contrary to the civic ideals of the public church, political decisions are rarely determined by the achievement of consensus through rational debate within the “public square.” Millions of corporate dollars are poured into the legislative process and electoral campaigns. Instead of promoting the interests of constituents, representatives promote those of powerful interests in exchange for campaign funds and other forms of bribery. Lobbyists have become so integral to the legislative process that they have been known to write bills for congresspersons and senators. The organization of campaigns, the formulation of policies (think tanks, private foundations) and the formation of public opinion depend upon huge concentrations of money and resources that only corporations and very few private individuals can command.⁷⁰ Not only do corporate players buy influence, William Cavanaugh adds, but government treats corporations as clients, with a revolving door between government and industry. Scores of government appointees oversee industries for which they once worked.⁷¹

69. Sheldon S. Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” *Constellations* 1 (1994): 13–14, 18–19, 22–3; Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*, expanded edn (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 401, 564–5, 602–3; Isaac Villegas, “Fugitive Democracy: Sheldon Wolin and Contemplating the Local,” April 25, 2006, <http://www.rustyparts.com/wp/2006/04/25/fugitive-democracy-sheldon-wolin-and-contemplating-the-local/#more-214>.

70. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, xvi, 526, 560–5, 578, 587–97, 600.

71. Among President Bush’s appointees, the person second in command at the Envi-

These insights should chasten facile confidence that the official channels and institutions of American “democracy” can tame the empire and the market and serve as our primary hope for alleviating injustices. For social and economic inequalities to be remedied by state action, Sheldon Wolin argues, the state must possess a sufficient autonomy to perform that function. But the politics of a liberal society allows those who control economic power to promote corporate interests through the political process.⁷² In agreement with Cavanaugh, I am not seeking to undermine all efforts to curb social injustices through participatory democratic engagement. However, I am cautioning against placing all of our proverbial eggs into this basket.

The Church’s Political Task: Conformity to the Shape of the Reign of God

According to the “sectarian accusation,” ecclesiological construals of the church as a political entity in its own right inevitably promote principled withdrawal of the church from “the larger society” into a counter-cultural ecclesial ghetto.⁷³ In this section and the next, I will argue that an apocalyptic imagination need not lead us in this direction.

72. Wolin, *Politics and Vision*, 526, 578, 600. Cavanaugh argues that we should not be hopeful about the prospects of any nation-state defending the “common good” against the brutal consequences of economic globalization. The surrender of sovereignty over tariffs, trade regulations, and environmental laws in the creation of the World Trade Organization was promoted by the governing elites of nation-states. The US Commerce Department and USAID have encouraged and subsidized the movement of factories to overseas locations. The 2002 economic stimulus package included \$21 billion in incentives for US corporations to use tax shelters in the Bahamas and other Caribbean countries. Cavanaugh, “Killing for the Telephone Company,” 245–9, 253–4, 258, 265.

73. James Gustafson, “The Sectarian Temptation: Reflections on Theology, the Church, and the University,” *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 40 (1985): 83–94. When an apocalyptic ecclesiology is combined with a sharp polemic against liberalism, “the secular,” and democracy, the fear provoked is that theologians are calling for total rejection of American society on the part of Christians. This was Jeffrey Stout’s critique of Stanley Hauerwas in *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 140, 147–8.

Statements such as “the political task of Christians is to be the church *rather* than to transform the world” suggest to critics that Hauerwas is indeed calling for sectarian withdrawal. Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People who Know that Something is Wrong. Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 38. Indeed, the title itself provoked strong visceral reactions. Hauerwas’s rhetorical excesses shed more heat than light, render him vulnerable to this critique, and obscure his more nuanced position. There are a multiplicity of statements scattered throughout his huge corpus of writings in which Hauerwas denies that it is

Douglas Harink charges that Wallis erroneously assumes that the church is not intrinsically a political body and, therefore, that the church *gets* political by going out of itself, as it were, and joining up with the political performances happening “out there” in the places of worldly power. Harink contends that the politics of the church is not, in the first place, or the second place either, to preach about how God’s people should “get involved” in the political processes of the wider world, but rather, “to shape its own sociopolitical life in accordance with the shape of God’s reign revealed in Christ’s life, death, and resurrection.”⁷⁴ Since Harink’s statements could be interpreted to mean that the church should cultivate its own inner life as an alternative social configuration in a manner that intentionally isolates itself from the world’s political realities,⁷⁵ it is important to articulate two reservations about the way Harink has framed the issue. First, while we should not pin our hopes on efforts to control what is going on in places of worldly power, ecclesial faithfulness may sometimes lead the church into multiple forms of interaction with such political performances. Second, Harink’s language is vulnerable to the seductive power of the territorial metaphors of “inside” and “outside.” There is no quasi-geographical space to which the church can “go” to escape the terrain upon which the principalities and powers operate. The church’s “inner” life is already situated on the playing field occupied by the principalities and powers. Christians are inextricably entangled in the

his intention that Christians give up working for justice. “As long as we remember that peoples and society are not synonymous with national interests,” he argues, the kinds of ecclesial communities he advocates “can participate in secular movements against war, against hunger, and against other forms of inhumanity as part of the church’s necessary proclamatory action.” “I have no interest in legitimating...a withdrawal of Christians or the church from social or political affairs. I simply want them to be there as Christians and as church.” Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 100–1; Hauerwas, *Against the Nations*, 1; Hauerwas and Willimon, *Resident Aliens*, 38, 47; Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom?: How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 68.

74. Harink, “Response to Jim Wallis’ *God’s Politics*”; Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals*, 258.

75. How, Harink asks, “do people get truly political?” He answers by affirming that “if they are Jewish, they are circumcised, keep the law, and share in the worship and life of the Jewish people. Or, if not Jewish, they believe the Gospel, they are baptized, they enter into the worship of the *ekklesia*, and they participate in the Eucharistic life of the congregation. Only out of this primary and constitutive political performance will the people of God be capable of interrupting the idolatrous and destructive discourses and performances in our nations which go by the name of ‘politics,’ and of speaking the word of truth into them, for their judgment and healing.” Harink, “Response to Jim Wallis’ *God’s Politics*.”

effects of principalities and powers in their daily lives of buying, selling, and being employed. Christians are already implicated in economic and social forces that determine who can live in particular neighborhoods in a racially and economically segregated nation, the use of tax dollars to fund a military superpower, and the complex functioning of the global economic system.

An apocalyptic imagination should not function to warrant a sectarian withdrawal into an isolated community precisely *because* the body of Christ has been drawn into the sphere of eschatological new creation. The intrusion of God's reign in the person of Jesus was upon the terrain occupied by the enslaving powers. Therefore, shaping an ecclesial sociopolitical life in conformity with the shape of God's reign requires some kind of intrusion into, rather than withdrawal from, the world in bondage to destructive powers. Deliverance from *bondage* to the powers is not escape from the social space in which they operate, but, rather, is a different form of participation that contests their destructive grip on human lives.

The "content" of this eschatological new creation is a divine delivering power that breaks the stranglehold of disease, disability, poverty, and social marginalization and restores human persons to wholeness and community. Jesus is identifiable as the messiah because "the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cured, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor" (Matt. 11:2-6; Luke 7:18-23).⁷⁶ Jesus commanded his followers to participate in God's reign by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, showing hospitality, visiting prisoners, and delivering persons in distress (Matt. 25:31-46; Luke 10:25-37). Jesus' healings were deeds of deliverance for destitute and socially marginalized persons;⁷⁷ for example, the economically vulnerable widow (Luke 7:11-15) and a woman with a perennial menstrual hemorrhage (Mark 5:25-34). Jesus formed a community that practices deliverance, in part, through its inclusion of and care for outcasts and the vulnerable (Luke 14:12-14).

The synoptic gospels interpret the arrival of the reign of God as an act of aggression in which Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit, breaks the stranglehold of the Evil One (Matt. 12:22-29). Ched Myers contends that the kingdom of Satan, within this apocalyptic imagination, is a sym-

76. Pointing to these deeds of deliverance constitutes an answer to John the Baptist because these actions embody expectations, articulated in the book of Isaiah, of a messianic future in which Yahweh's righteousness is manifested on earth as a time of justice, peace, and human flourishing.

77. In many segments of first-century Palestinian Judaism, disease and disabilities were viewed as forms of impurity and indicative of a divine curse. These persons were further victimized by dehumanizing social mechanisms of exclusion.

bolic accentuation of the negative experiences of earthly rule.⁷⁸ The Evil One's power is broken when persons are *delivered* from bondage to the multiplicity of forces that harm and destroy life. We should recognize the continuity between events narrated as demon expulsions and Jesus' confrontations with various segments of the ruling elite. Jesus entered into conflict with forces, practices, and institutions that enslaved, oppressed, and dehumanized human persons.⁷⁹ Jesus' condemnation of those who turned the temple into a den of thieves is connected to the role of the temple elite in predatory lending practices through which the Judean aristocracy sought to accumulate land and wealth by foreclosing on the small land-holdings of peasants who could not pay their debts due to burdensome taxation or other misfortunes.⁸⁰ Jesus' crucifixion was, in part, a result of his quite public opposition to an institution that "devoured widow's houses" (Mark 12:38-44).

78. Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 165. Edward Schillebeeckx, Stanley Grenz, and others have suggested that Jesus' healings and exorcisms should be interpreted in relation to first-century Palestinian Jewish eschatology. This apocalyptic imagination interpreted history according to the idea of two ages. The present evil age is a period of conflict between God and the evil spirits, who form a unified kingdom under the leadership of Satan. Illness, disabilities, misfortune, suffering, and oppressive social and political structures are construed as manifestations of the stranglehold of Satan on human life. Israel's messianic hope is that in the glorious age to come, Satan's power will be broken and God's good intentions for human wholeness will be fully realized. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1979), 183-4; Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 289-92.

79. A paradigmatic example is found in Luke 13:10-17. Jesus' healing of a woman afflicted by an "evil spirit" that had prevented her from standing upright for eighteen years is simultaneously an act of deliverance from social marginalization and an oppressive, purity-centered, view of the law. In a patriarchal culture and one that viewed illness and disability as signs of God's curse, Jesus affirmed her dignity as a woman treasured by God when he called her a daughter of Abraham. Jesus re-positioned her in the front of the synagogue, a place of honor from which women and disabled persons would have been excluded. In this act, which included healing on the Sabbath, and which violated a reading of the fourth commandment through the lens of a theological vision that prioritized the purity codes as the heart of the law, Jesus engaged in a provocative challenge to the entire social system anchored in a reading of the law centered in ritual purity and rigid boundaries. William H. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God: A Ministry of Liberation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2000), 183-5.

80. Evidence that the temple played this role is found in the fact that the leaders of the First Jewish Revolt (CE66) burned the debt records in the temple archives. Herzog, *Jesus, Justice, and the Reign of God*, 90-3, 102-4, 107, 121-3, 136-7, 167-8, 189, 193, 241; Herzog cites Martin Goodman, *The Ruling Class of Judea: The Origins of the Jewish Revolt Against Rome, A.D. 66-70* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 57.

Wallis has correctly insisted that God's purposes are signaled by Jesus' identification with the messianic prophet of Isaiah 61, anointed with the Spirit to establish justice and deliver and heal the poor, the captives, the blind, and oppressed. At Pentecost, the church receives the same anointing, indicating that the church's vocation is in continuity with that of Jesus.⁸¹ I would add that the purpose of Christian engagement with society's institutions of governance or other institutions outside the church, if the church is indeed called to shape its socio-political life in conformity with God's reign, should be *faithful ecclesial witness* and passionate concern for the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the vulnerable. Christian concern for something like social justice is based upon Jesus' practice of showing active, delivering compassion for persons in distress. If Jesus opposed the economic exploitation of widows, Christians cannot ignore unjust global economic arrangements that allow a small minority to accumulate incredible wealth while billions are destitute. If Jesus delivered persons from multiple forms of bondage, discipleship includes efforts to deliver persons from malnutrition, torture, sex trafficking, inhumane working conditions, dehumanizing racist or sexist social arrangements, and domestic violence. This requires an intrusion into the world and calls us, like Jesus, to confront practices and powers that oppress and afflict and to efforts to heal and mend what is damaged.

Ecclesial Witness as Local, Engaged Participation in the Intrusion of the Eschatological New Creation

Even though I am profoundly sympathetic to Wallis's political agenda, the most serious problem is the grave danger that the political movement he hopes to lead will be detached from ecclesial witness. Is Wallis's primary goal to encourage Christians to take their "personal faith" into the "public" arena and become part of his movement to change the political climate in America, or is the goal to encourage Christian communities to shape and form their members so that their collective forms of political engagement will be a faithful witness to the reign of God? Of course, Wallis's answer would be "both." But in spite of his best intentions, the center of gravity in his thinking and activism has shifted to a national faith-based movement that seeks, above all else, to lobby for better legislation. To the extent this happens, the church's mission to be a distinctive visible embodiment of the reign of God will unwittingly be eclipsed through its subordination to a movement that treats the nation-state and the legislative process as the primary locus of solutions for social injustices.

81. Wallis, *The Call to Conversion*, 112, 141–3.

Attempts to influence the ruling powers at the national level in order to “change structures” are not wrong. However, such efforts cease to function as genuine forms of ecclesial witness and public performance of the reign of God if they are a substitute for, or fail to flow from, the visible and embodied witness of local bodies of Christians. A congregation’s participation in a “Bread for the World” letter-writing campaign should grow from rather than replace efforts to feed hungry persons locally. Opposition to exploitive trade agreements in Latin America will be more persuasive if rooted in a US-based congregation’s partnership with a congregation in Latin America, in which close relationships of mutual enrichment, support, and unity, within the body of Christ across national boundaries, have been formed. The Sanctuary Movement emerged from simple, local acts of concrete obedience to Christ’s command, in the parable of the Good Samaritan, to deliver our neighbors in danger without regard to national or ethnic loyalties. Political advocacy for dramatic changes in American foreign policy and immigration policy⁸² flowed directly from the visible witness of communities whose first task was to “perform” the hospitality and deliverance that is the reign of God. Political activism resulted from the momentum of basic acts of obedient ecclesial witness.

One might wonder how political engagement that begins locally and does not aspire to control the processes of social change from the top down might be effective. In this final section of the paper, I can only offer an abstract sketch or the broad outlines of a proposal for a different theological vision of Christian political engagement by suggesting a possible line of convergence between the work of certain political theorists who have emphasized the possibilities embedded within political engagement that begins locally and an apocalyptic imagination with a particular pneumatological emphasis.⁸³

Multiple currents of recent thought provide support for approaches to social change that take their starting point in local struggles, suffering, and human needs and eschew efforts to change society that focus primarily upon influencing the President and Congress. Romand Coles advocates a slow and patient politics that begins with something resembling pastoral care: relationship-building and listening to the hurts, fears, needs, and struggles of local people.⁸⁴ Julie Graham, Catherine Gibson, and Gar Alperovitz emphasize the subversive potential of alternative practices and

82. See Dana W. Wilbanks, “The Church as Sign and Agent of Transformation,” in Hessel, ed., *The Church’s Public Role*, 30.

83. Obviously, this proposal will be further developed in a later writing project.

84. Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 4, 7–8, 19, 56–7, 66–7; Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, xxii, xxix, 69.

institutions on the micro-level. They articulate hope for the peaceful, but revolutionary, work of bringing to life something qualitatively new within the interstices of the old system through the patient construction of a mosaic of radically different institutions such as worker-owned firms, alternative enterprise networks, and worker or consumer cooperatives. Graham and Gibson maintain that the goal is not to wrest control from the state, but to create alternative zones of counter-power. Instead of conceding hegemonic power to the dominant political and economic orders to define reality, such initiatives assert and create other ways of being in the world and identify creative possibilities for local transformation and just might produce transformation on a larger scale.⁸⁵

Sheldon Wolin argues that real democracy has a certain “fugitive” character, laden with certain quasi-apocalyptic⁸⁶ possibilities whenever people come together *temporarily* in acts of resistance against particular injustices. Instead of pinning hope for the “common good” on the power of the modern state, Wolin argues that the possibility of renewal rests in the fact that ordinary individuals are:

capable of creating new cultural patterns of commonality at any moment. Individuals who concert their powers for low-income housing, worker ownership of factories, better schools, better health care, safer water, controls over toxic waste disposals, and a thousand other common concerns of ordinary lives are experiencing a democratic moment and contributing to the discovery, care, and tending of a commonality of shared concerns.⁸⁷

85. An example of efforts to construct alternative practices and institutions on the micro-level is the Economic Model for Millenium 2000 initiative in western Massachusetts, which consists of a network of businesses in which 5–20% of their equity is employee-owned and another 5–20% is held by a community fund administered by a regional economic council consisting of labor unions, community groups, churches, and educational institutions, community development funds and agencies, government, and private business. The aim is to tie capital to a locality, distribute the surplus for strengthening the local community economy, enhancing community engagement, and providing social services. Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 4, 7–8, 19, 56–7, 66–7; Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics*, xxii, xxix, 69; J. K. Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xx–xxiv, 182, 188; Gar Alperovitz, *America Beyond Capitalism: Reclaiming Our Wealth, Our Liberty, and Our Democracy* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2005), viii–ix, 3, 6, cited by Hauerwas and Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary*, 161–3.

86. In this context, I am using the word apocalyptic in a non-theological sense. I am referring to the emergence of something that is, vis-à-vis the dominant institutions and cultural values, radically novel, something which opens to view new and previously unanticipated possibilities.

87. Wolin, “Fugitive Democracy,” 24, 29.

Wolin's modest hope is that as people come together and discover shared grievances or needs, local democratic movements might explode into a wildfire that spreads to the centers of power and exerts pressure on the ruling powers. Sometimes the unanticipated and "unanticipatable" happens: an "apocalyptic spark" that produces an "evanescent homogeneity" of the broader political, as happened in the abolitionist and Civil Rights movements, the Populist and agrarian revolts of the nineteenth century, and the struggles for autonomous trade unions and women's rights.⁸⁸

If resources for a better vision of ecclesial faithfulness are to be found within an apocalyptic theological imagination, we must confront the danger of distortion embedded in the metaphorical imagery of "intrusion" or "invasion" by the Kingdom of God. This language suggests a picture of the reign of God coming into the "space" of creation and human history completely from "outside" and therefore representing *total* rupture, *total* discontinuity, and *stark antithesis* between human cultures and societies and the reign of God. A corresponding ecclesiological model would indeed be a "sectarian" practice that seeks, as much as is possible, to escape from human society or an aggressive stance of sharp and relentless opposition and denunciation.

But what if radical apocalyptic discontinuity is not stark antithesis?

In spite of their rather different theological agendas, John Howard Yoder and Walter Wink not only emphasize that the "principalities and powers" are radically fallen, but also insist that even in their sinful distortion, they remain rooted in God's good intentions. Amid their brokenness and idolatry, identifiable fragments of creational goodness remain.⁸⁹ Both Miroslav Volf and Yoder have argued that we cannot describe the church-world relationship in terms of either fundamental commensurability or principled incommensurability of value systems. Cultures and societies are not self-enclosed, monolithic, and internally self-consistent "systems" of beliefs and values, but, rather, are sites of contestation.⁹⁰ Facets of any

88. Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy," 23; Villegas, "Fugitive Democracy."

89. Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 10, 52–3, 65–70, 82–3; John Howard Yoder, "How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: A Critique of *Christ and Culture*," in Glen H. Stassen, Diane M. Yeager and John Howard Yoder, *Authentic Transformation: A New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1996), 68–70, 76, 83–90, 283, nn. 133 and 136; John Howard Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 136, 209 n. 2.

90. Volf and Yoder also insist that there is no one proper church-society stance. There are numerous ways of accepting, rejecting, subverting, or transforming various aspects of any culture. Miroslav Volf, "Soft Difference: Theological Reflections on the Relation Between Church and Culture in 1 Peter," *Ex Auditu* 10 (1994): 26–9; Yoder, "How H.

human society will be in continuity with Christian convictions and values, while other aspects will be antithetical to the faith, and others still will be an ambiguous mixture of creational goodness and sinful distortion.⁹¹

The metaphor of “intrusion” of the eschatological new creation in Christ needs supplementation by a pneumatological accent upon the ubiquity of the Holy Spirit’s presence and activity in our world. The Spirit is not confined to the life of the Christian community. If the Holy Spirit is the eschatological Spirit, in whose power Jesus the Messiah performs and embodies the Reign of God, and if the Spirit’s activity in the world is that of drawing the world toward Christ who is, after all, the personal presence of the reign of God, then the Spirit’s work must also be that of drawing the world in the direction of eschatological transformation.⁹²

Richard Niebuhr Reasoned,” 31–90. See also the argument of Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997).

This insight would also allow critical appreciation of multiple facets of American history, society, and politics without necessarily undermining the sharp critique of the injustices of the nation and its imperial behavior articulated by the theologians we have surveyed.

91. Barry Harvey provides a helpful set of categories in his retrieval of Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s category of the “natural” as those practices and products of the “earthly city” which, after the Fall, remain open to Christ and the messianic reign of God; and the “unnatural,” those aspects of human societies and institutions that are refusals of Christ and the reign of God. Of course, the natural and the unnatural, creational goodness and sin, are so intertwined that they cannot be neatly or tidily differentiated. Barry Harvey, “Preserving the World for Christ: Toward a Theological Engagement with the ‘Secular’,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61 (2008): 64–82.

92. D. Lyle Dabney argues that the western theological tradition has been marked by a pronounced tendency to subordinate pneumatology to Christology and, consequently, to limit the Spirit’s role to the subjective appropriation in faith of the objective work of Christ. However, Dabney argues that the Bible bears witness to the wider work of the Holy Spirit, including activity of the Spirit that “precedes” and prepares for the Word of God. From the Spirit’s hovering over the waters in preparation for the utterance of God’s creative word (Gen. 1:1-3) to the Spirit’s activity in the ministry of the prophets, to Jesus’ conception by the Spirit, the Spirit’s presence and activity is presupposed by the utterance of the Word. Jesus’ messianic mission was dependent on his anointing by the Holy Spirit (Luke 3:21-22; 4:16-21). On this basis, Dabney calls for a recognition of the Spirit’s ubiquitous and mysterious presence and activity throughout creation and human existence. D. Lyle Dabney, “Naming the Spirit: Towards a Pneumatology of the Cross.” See also Dabney, “Starting with the Spirit” and “Nature of the Spirit.” These three unpublished lectures were delivered in April 1999 in Canberra, Australia. Dabney, “Justified by the Spirit: Soteriological Reflections on the Resurrection,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 3 (2001): 46–68.

In his exegetical analysis of 1 Peter, Miroslav Volf argues, against the imaginative power of Stanley Hauerwas's and William Willimon's master metaphor, that Christians are not "resident aliens." Christians are the "insiders" who have diverted from their culture by being "born again" and no longer living like they used to live. The Christian difference is not an insertion of something new into the old from outside, but is a "bursting out" of the eschatologically novel within the proper space of the old.⁹³ If Volf's illuminating metaphor is expanded and combined with a theological affirmation of the Spirit's mysterious and ubiquitous presence and activity, we should be open to the possibility that eschatological novelty and transformation may erupt unexpectedly from within the interstices of the old. This is not the organic unfolding or development of possibilities latent within the old. Rather, it is the *transfiguration* of the old as the Spirit makes possible unanticipated transformations within our world. Instead of "confining" the Spirit's work to the church, this model seeks to recognize the possibilities of eschatological transformation at those points of intersection between church and world. If genuinely positive transformation happens in human history, it is to be attributed to the power of the Holy Spirit opening up new possibilities for human flourishing, reconciliation of enemies, peace, justice, food for the hungry, healing for the sick, and fragments of social justice.

Could there be some overlap or convergence, albeit imperfect, in some but not all circumstances, between what Wolin described as the fugitive character of democracy, often characterized by an apocalyptic spark that cannot be managed or controlled, and the work of the Holy Spirit in human history? Instead of assuming that Christian political engagement requires the requisite cultural dominance to exert influence on the state and some measure of control of the processes of social change from the top down, could we envision a model of Christian political engagement that is concerned, first and foremost, with faithful, concrete, and locally embodied ecclesial witness that begins with "the least of these" in our midst? Like the young man who offered Jesus his five loaves and two fishes, might we not hope that the modesty of the starting point does not determine the ultimate social and political impact? Local struggles may be the occasion through which God's Spirit acts to open possibilities for the emergence of what is genuinely eschatologically novel within the interstices of fallen social orders and institutions. After all, the Civil Rights Movement began with a small group of African-American Christians addressing a local problem and struggling for the modest goal of relative equality in the seating arrangements on city buses.

93. Volf, "Soft Difference," 18–19.

Conclusion

My goal has been to sketch the broad outlines, of a model of Christian political engagement as ecclesial witness that seeks to avoid the extremes of “sectarian withdrawal” or the assumption that political engagement means positioning the church as servant and sub-system within the larger system that is American democracy and capitalism and seeking social change solely through efforts to influence the state apparatus. Public church models assume a continuity and compatibility between American democratic institutions of governance and Christian faith that is incompatible with an apocalyptic theological vision. In addition, the public church model is in grave crisis if, as Wolin and others suggest, we are in a post-democratic context.

An apocalyptic imagination *is* antithetical to the strategy of pinning our hopes for justice on any human project, including American democracy. This approach need not entail complete abandonment of efforts to change society through conventional democratic activism but it does not pin its hopes upon such efforts or focus primarily upon lobbying for better public policy. The model I have suggested may equip us with an ecclesial and political imagination to carry on faithfully in a context in which it has become painfully evident that “civil public discourse” is broken⁹⁴ and politically progressive Christians are clearly not in control of our society. This model pins its hopes, not on the state of American public life and the institutions of democratic governance, but on the transformative power of the Spirit who works through ordinary actions of faithful ecclesial discipleship. The basis for a hopeful Christian political engagement is the power of God’s Spirit to open new possibilities for transformation that we may not be able to anticipate and certainly cannot control. This approach would also repudiate any kind of “sectarian” withdrawal into self-enclosed communities of virtue that restrict themselves to modeling a counter-cultural alternative. Local ecclesial witness will take the form of joining in conversations and economic experimentation and local struggles that bring Christian communities into multiple forms of solidarity or collaboration with persons outside the church.

94. The lack of substantive argumentation and analysis and the level of vitriol surrounding debates about healthcare reform during the first year of the Obama administration illustrate the tragic state of American public life.

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