

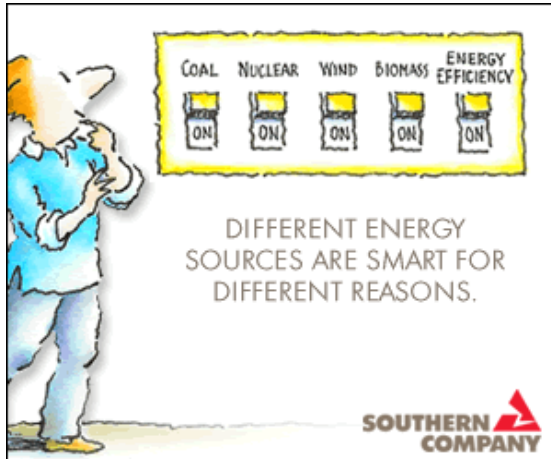


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## A liberal God?

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Nothing seems to scare the populist Left more than the people. Protest the Obama administration's big spending, pervasive centralizing, expansive regulating policies, and you must be an enemy of all that is good and true. Attend a Tea Party rally and you're probably a racist and certainly not a Christian.

At least that is the view of the leading left-wing evangelical Jim Wallis. Indeed, he sees the Tea Party as an essentially libertarian movement, which makes it doubly suspect. He declares: "Libertarianism has never been much of a multi-cultural movement. Need I say that racism—overt, implied, or even subtle—is not a Christian virtue."

So Tea Party activists aren't good Christians. And many of them are racists. Of course.

Wallis is a devout and well-intentioned Christian believer, but his political understanding is less impressive. The Tea Party movement incorporates several philosophical influences. Polls show adherents split between Sarah Palin and Ron Paul, suggesting philosophical confusion if not schizophrenia.

Moreover, 57 percent of Tea Party activists indicated a favorable view of President George W. Bush—the big spender who centralized power in Washington and the executive branch, and who embarked on a remarkably foolish program of international social engineering through war. Whatever he was, it wasn't libertarian.

Nor is it obvious that most Tea Party activists share the libertarian vision of radically smaller government. But the two groups have united to oppose the Obama administration's program of ever-expanding government spending and regulation in most every sphere.

Does opposing the "Obama Revolution" put them, these Wallis-certified "libertarians," on God's naughty list?

Wallis expresses a number of objections to libertarianism. The first is the belief in individual choice:

“Emphasizing individual rights at the expense of others violates the common good.” Indeed, “Loving your neighbor is a better Christian response than telling your neighbor to leave you alone.”

But what does one have to do with another? If one’s neighbor is in need—assume anything from collecting mail to watching kids to providing food or even money—then a good person, irrespective of ideology, will help. It has nothing to do with the government. Indeed, AEI’s Arthur Brooks made the inconvenient discovery that people on the Right give more of their incomes to charity than people on the Left. And not just a little more. By one measure those who oppose forcible income redistribution give *ten times* as much as fans of Uncle Sam acting like Santa Claus. It seems that Wallis’s Big Government allies really believe their rhetoric: poverty is government’s problem to solve rather than their responsibility to alleviate.

Now assume this same neighbor wants to call in the authorities to stop you from smoking, seize more of your income, appropriate half of your back yard, prevent you from owning a firearm, force you to send your kid to an awful government school, or bail out the failing businesses in which he or she invested. You *should* tell your neighbor to leave you alone—even as you show love by helping him or her.

Wallis also argues that “An anti-government ideology just isn’t biblical.” But the fact that the Apostle Paul cites a role for government indicates that the institution is necessary, not that it is to be trusted. Let’s stipulate that libertarians/Tea Party activists shouldn’t be anarchists if they are Christians. But if they like George W. Bush, that is a given. What advocates of limited government understand is that someone has to hold accountable sinful human beings who wield state power.

In this regard, libertarians better understand government—and Christian theology—than does Wallis. Consider what the Prophet Samuel said when the Israelites clamored for a king:

“This is what the king who will reign over you will do: He will take your sons and make them serve with his chariots and horses, and they will run in front of his chariots. Some he will assign to be commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and others to plow his ground and reap his harvest, and still others to make weapons of war and equipment for his chariots. He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive groves and give them to his attendants. He will take a tenth of your grain and of your vintage and give it to his officials and attendants. Your menservants and maidservants and the best of your cattle and donkeys he will take for his own use. He will take a tenth of your flocks, and you yourselves will become his slaves. When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen, and the LORD will not answer you in that day.” (1 Samuel 8: 11-18)

Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely, warned Lord Acton. No power is more absolute than that to arrest, imprison, and kill, all of which belong to the state. For many social engineers on the Left politics has replaced religion as the means by which they seek meaning in life—to the detriment of the rest of us.

Unfortunately, Wallis appears to have skipped history class. He says, “a power-hungry government is clearly an aberration.” Really? The 20<sup>th</sup> century was filled with totalitarian death states and assembly-line thugocracies. Even democratic governments institutionalized racism, turned eugenics into policy, played reverse Robin Hood, enriched corporate elites, manipulated elections, violated civil liberties, and started wars. He doesn’t have to look back far to see widespread fears for American liberty at the hands of democratically elected leaders. He should just reread what many of his allies on the left were writing about George W. Bush, who claimed to possess extraordinary and unreviewable powers.

Indeed, on the issue of war and peace, about which Wallis often has written, libertarians are far more reluctant to use force than the Left—at least, those who purport to represent the Left in government. Bill Clinton took the U.S. to war in the Balkans, presiding over mass ethnic cleansing by our official allies, the Kosovo Liberation Army. Barack Obama has made Afghanistan his war, twice escalating U.S. force levels. Libertarians sometimes disagree over these issues, but most have opposed wars begun and expanded by Republicans and Democrats alike.

Moreover, Wallis complains about “the libertarians’ supreme confidence in the market.” BP should not be allowed to spew oil into the ocean: “God’s priorities should determine ours, not the priorities of the Chamber of Commerce.”

Actually most libertarians—as well as many Tea Party activists, who have criticized the recent tsunami of corporate bailouts—distrust the Chamber of Commerce no less than does Wallis. After all, the worst enemies of capitalism are usually the capitalists. Businesses work overtime to get politicians to provide subsidies, block competitors, and turn competitive economies into kleptocratic fiefdoms. What libertarians understand, in contrast to Wallis, is that the more powerful the government and the more expansive the state authority, the more effort and money business will deploy to win control for its own benefit.

The preferred strategy of the Left is to ignore human nature and search for a gaggle of Vestal Virgins to install in the White House, Congress, and federal regulatory agencies. People from whom greed, self-interest, arrogance, and other vices have been completely drained. Then these angelic beings will rule for the benefit of all.

Libertarians have a more realistic idea. Constrain government power. Let the state focus on controlling environmental externalities, such as oil spills and air emissions, which result from the lack of property rights in resources like the ocean and air. But work to shrink the Left’s federal behemoth, which victimizes the public by, for instance, limiting the liability of oil companies for accidents and providing bountiful subsidies to them for energy development.

In fact, the tendency of government to be captured by interest groups belies Wallis’ complaint about “the libertarian preference for the strong over the weak.” Who does he think controls the political process? Directs legislative appropriations? Writes bureaucratic regulations? The strong or the weak?

The federal government provides \$100 billion a year in corporate welfare. The Export-Import Bank is known as Boeing’s Bank. Social Security and Medicare are middle class welfare programs. Trillions of dollars in bailouts after the crash of 2008 went to the corporate, banking, and investment sectors. The pharmaceutical industry paid off the Obama administration for political protection; in fact, the drugmakers are likely to make even more as a result of health care “reform.” The best friends of the strong are the enthusiasts for the expansive, expensive welfare state. In this regard the Obama administration is little different than its predecessor.

Moreover, Wallis disparages the role of private charity, but in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, “As you have done to the least of these,” not “As you have forced others to do to the least of these.” In his second letter to the Corinthians the Apostle Paul explicitly refused to command his readers to give, for “God loves a cheerful giver.”

Of course, Paul laid a heavy guilt trip on his readers that would be difficult to resist. Indeed, charity should be a natural outgrowth of Christian faith. But no one should mistake taxation as compassion. In this regard Wallis shares much with George W. Bush, who believed that giving away other people’s money turned him into a “compassionate conservative.” Wallis certainly could argue that coerced welfare transfers are good public policy, despite the destruction of families and communities that has resulted over the years. But no Scripture suggests that Christians exhibit virtue by seizing the wealth of others to give away, no matter how worthwhile the objective might seem to be.

Finally, if Wallis is searching for racial prejudice, the libertarian movement is an odd place to look. Classical liberals, as the philosophical forebears of libertarians were known, took the lead in opposing slavery and Jim Crow. Classical liberals opposed imperialist wars against other peoples, such as the bloody conquest of the Philippines.

Libertarians have consistently opposed the abusive state, which enacted and enforced segregation. Libertarians have acted on behalf of the poor and disadvantaged by demanding the end of state barriers to economic advancement, such as occupational licensure, and to educational attainment, such as monopoly state schools. For instance, decades ago the Davis-Bacon Act, which artificially inflates wages for federal projects, was promoted by legislators to protect their white constituents from the competition of poor black laborers: the words of these real racists have been forever immortalized in the Congressional Record. And today libertarians oppose a

politicized racial spoils system that is manipulated by both black and white elites: the result is injustice and unfairness that inflames, rather than eliminates, racism.

While the religious right is often accused of confusing its political views with Christian theology, Jim Wallis makes the same mistake. Jesus ministered outside of politics. Scripture is heavy on man's relationship with God and his neighbors, but the Bible says very little about when man should use government to regulate, tax, arrest, imprison, and kill his neighbors. For these tasks we should heed James' injunction to ask God for wisdom. We shouldn't pretend that God is on our side of the political divide.

Jim Wallis is fully entitled to criticize libertarians and Tea Party activists for their principles and policies. But he shouldn't question their faith. At least they don't spend most of their time in politics attempting to use the state to pass their personal moral responsibilities off onto everyone else, as do so many of Wallis' Big Government allies.

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