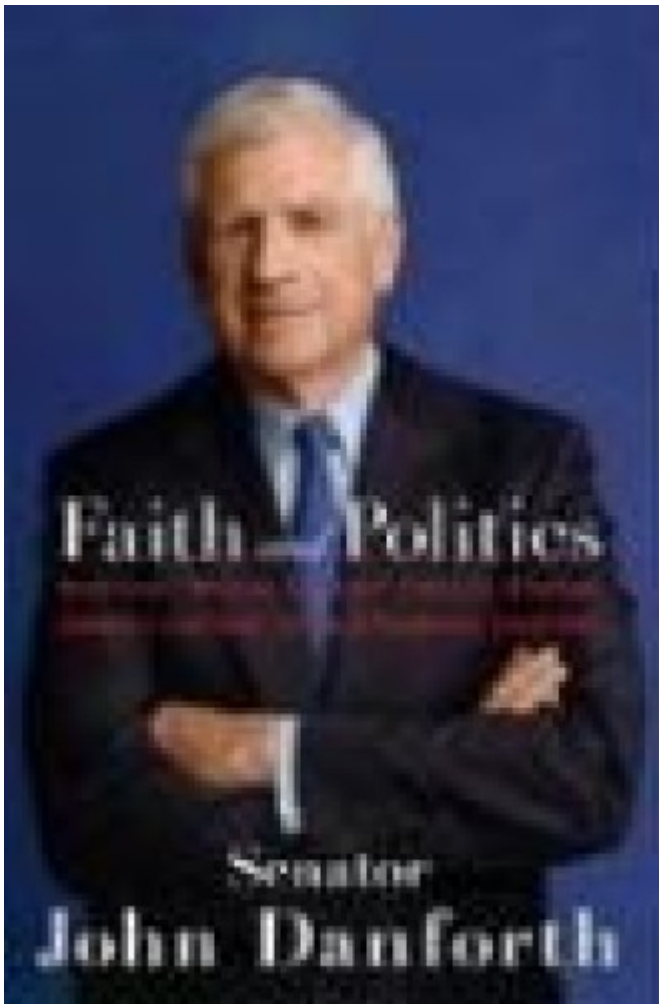


Faith and Politics: How the "Moral Values" Debate Divides America and How to Move Forward Together

reviewed by [Michael G. Long](#) in the [January 9, 2007](#) issue

In Review



Faith and Politics: How the "Moral Values" Debate Divides America and How to Move Forward Together

John Danforth

Viking

This is not a ghostwritten book signed by yet another famous politician hoping to cash in after years of public service. Nor is it a typical political autobiography with incendiary comments about the opposition, a self-serving profile of courage, and a surefire recipe for returning the United States to greatness.

The real author of *Faith and Politics* is John Danforth, a former U.S. senator (R., Mo.) and an ordained Episcopal priest, and his short book is one of the most self-effacing and thoughtful essays on Christianity and politics to appear in recent years.

A major part of Danforth's project is to inspire Christians to move beyond the Manichaeian politics practiced by the Christian right and the Christian left—a politics that defines a so-called Christian political agenda, pits the faithful against the infidels, and treats Christians primarily as voters.

Jim Wallis has already taken up a similar challenge, but Danforth quickly informs us that he is no Wallis and that he will not identify "God's politics" with a liberal or conservative political agenda. Why? "In sum, the creation of a political agenda is the work of some Christians, but it was not the work of Christ." No matter what this Age of Certainty may tell us, there is no set of rules for Christians to follow when staking out specific policy positions.

This claim will shock and perhaps anger some Christian pacifists, antiabortion activists and others who believe that their faith consists of moral absolutes that should be enshrined in public policy. But the reticent Danforth is right: Christian scriptures and the life of Jesus offer no specific policy directives for governments to adopt and practice.

All that our Christian faith leaves us with, Danforth writes, is "an approach, a way of thinking about and engaging in politics, that while not issue specific, is highly relevant to our ability to live together as one nation, despite our strongly held differences."

This approach embraces humility, recognizing that our politics can never fully encapsulate God's; it seeks reconciliation within the body politic, focusing less on wedge issues that drive us apart (like the case of Terri Schiavo) and more on common-ground issues (like realistic peacemaking initiatives in Sudan).

Unfortunately, Danforth is much better at criticizing the self-righteousness of political absolutists than he is at defining his Christian approach to politics.

On a practical level, his common-ground approach sacrifices major issues on the high altar of national unity. One would think, after all, that the war in Iraq would deserve special mention in a discussion of reconciliation in contemporary U.S. politics, but the ongoing conflagration barely makes an appearance in *Faith and Politics*.

On a theological level, the goal of Danforth's Christian politics—the unity of our political society—is also deeply troubling. To suggest a bit of internal criticism: preserving our body politic may be the work of some Christians, but it was not the work of Christ.

Christian scriptures certainly encourage us to practice “a ministry of reconciliation,” but nowhere do we find support for using our faith to prop up a particular body politic—any body politic. The Christian practice of reconciliation is for the benefit of the world, not merely U.S. political society, and experience has taught us that not all bodies politic, especially not ours, have served the cause of global reconciliation.

Despite his insightful reflections on political humility, Danforth preaches a truly American gospel; this is a classic case of U.S. patriotism trumping Christian faith. The unintended result, of course, is that the world will continue to be as divided as ever.