The Relevance of Religion: How Faithful People Can Change Politics

John Danforth
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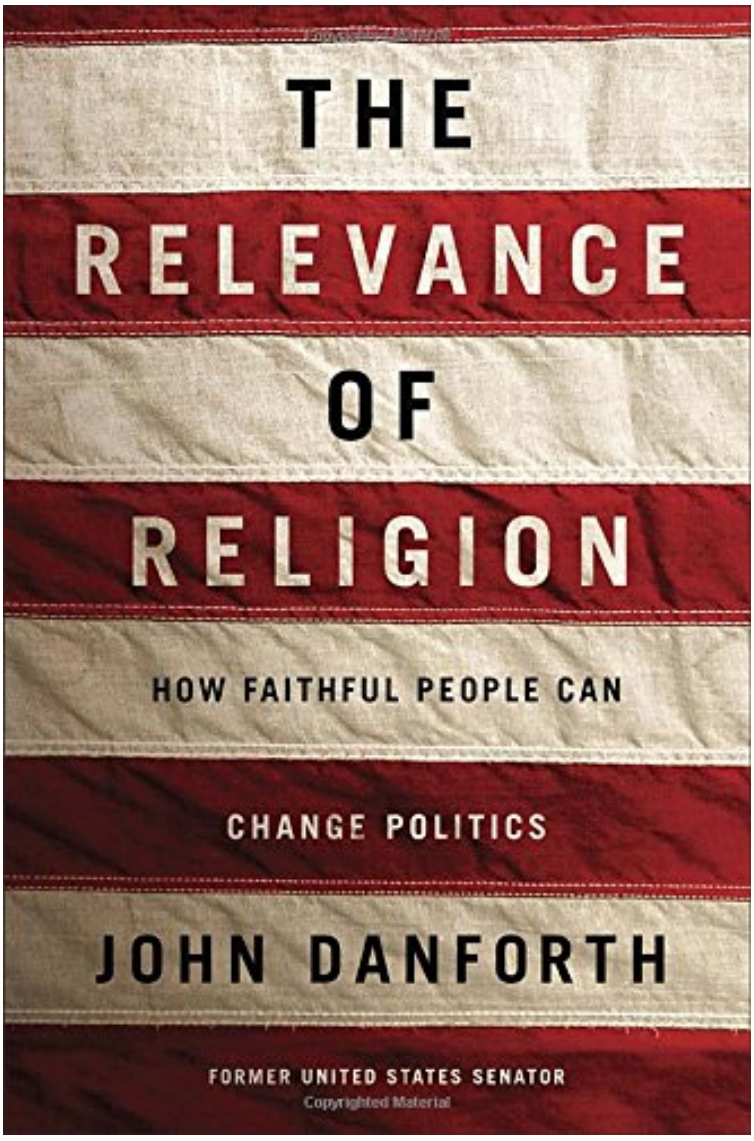

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John Danforth : The Relevance of Religion: How Faithful People Can Change Politics before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Relevance of Religion: How Faithful People Can Change Politics:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. An important message about politics for churched and unchurched AmericansBy John BoltonJohn Danforth is old school Republican and old school but tolerant Episcopal priest. While

he addresses the "religious", his message can be heard by the unchurched, "humanists", non-believers and atheists. He isn't telling us much we don't know when he talks about governmental dysfunction. His experience in the Senate makes his view unique and important. While he does not mention the antebellum Congresses of the 1850s directly he sees us devolving into that era's uncompromising march to division and war, nor does he dwell on 1930's Germany's rush to extremes (communism and nationalism) and the loss of the middle ground. He sees politicians polarizing to "the base" with their single focus of being reelected; "the base" leads, the politicians follow, instead of the leaders leading and listening and able to compromise for the greatest good. Our politics have become "all or nothing". Danforth believes country was founded on the Constitution, a document that was skeptical of political power, and relied on the Christian virtue of the populace -- evangelical Christianity and Enlightenment Christianity (including deism) being dominating influences during the Revolutionary period. Our response as Christians, or simply "the people" to include those that are no-Christians/non-believers, should be to hold our politicians to task, to hold them accountable for their divisive rhetoric. It is up to us "the people" to be virtuous as individuals, to participate in community. This is an important book as we head into the 2016 election. It should be read and discussed by people serious about the direction of our Republic.1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. This book reminds me of how much we miss such ...By J. TalmageThis book reminds me of how much we miss such legislators as John Danforth. He addresses the real problem we have in our country--the divisiveness and uncivil conflict. He also demonstrates the real secular meaning and relevance of Christianity, although it can be equally true of other religions. As both a sociologist and a minister who has been politically active for my adult life, I am deeply appreciative of Danforth's work in general, and this work in particular.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A good book makes you think and this is a good ...By CustomerA good book makes you think and this is a good book. It is an excellent antidote to the reflexive fundamentalist dogma that is so common in political discourse around religious and cultural issues today. The basic thesis of this book is that religion, at is core, is about belief in something beyond self, and therefore should focus on the common good. And political philosophies that focus on the self and lose contact with the common good are fundamentally antireligious. He calls to account much of the libertarian rhetoric in the public square as being at odds with religion. This book is a must read for people who think critically about religion and politics.

Former United States senator and ambassador to the United Nations John Danforth offers a fascinating, thoughtful, and deeply personal look at the state of American politics todayand how religion can be a bridge over our bitter partisan divide. In an era of extreme partisanship, when running for office has become a zero-sum game in which candidates play exclusively to their ideological bases, Americans on both sides of the political aisle hunger for the return of a commitment to the common good. Too often, it seems, religion has been used as a wedge to divide us in these battles. But is it also the key to restoring our civic virtue?For more than a decade, John Danforth, who is also an ordained Episcopal priest, has written extensively on the negative use of religion as a divisive force in American politics. Now he turns to the positive, constructive impact faithful religious believers have and can have on our public life. The Relevance of Religion is the product of that period of reflection. In the calm and wise voice of the pastor he once aspired to be, Senator Danforth argues that our shared religious values can lead us out of the embittered, entrenched state of politics today. A lifelong Republican, he calls his own party to task for its part in creating a political system in which the loudest opinions and the most polarizing personalities hold sway. And he suggests that such a system is not only unsustainable but unfaithful to our essential nature. We are built to care about other people, and this inherent altruismwhich science says we crave because of our neurobiological wiring, and the Bible says is part of our created natureis a crucial aspect of good government. Our willingness to serve more than our self-interest is religions gift to politics, John Danforth asserts. In an era when 75 percent of Americans say they cannot trust their elected leaders, The Relevance of Religion is a heartfelt plea for more compassionate governmentand a rousing call to arms for those wishing to follow the better angels of our nature.Praise for The Relevance of Religion Using well-supported arguments deriving from his ministerial as well as legal background, Danforth asserts that traditional religious values of sacrifice, selflessness and a commitment to the greater good can and should have prominent roles in Americas politics. . . . Danforths arguments are staunchly supported and clearly explained. . . . For anyone who is faithful as well as political, he provides much food for thought.St. Louis Post-DispatchJohn Danforth does his country another service after many. His book is both a serious critique of politicized religion and a strong defense of religions indispensable role in our common life. He talks of faith as an antidote to egotism, as a force for reconciliation, and as a source of public virtue. His case is illustrated through autobiography, in an honest, winsome, and sometimes self-critical tone. Danforth speaks for civility, collegiality, and useful compromiseand is compelling because he has demonstrated all those commitments himself over the decades.Michael Gerson, columnist, The Washington PostIn this wise and urgent book, John Danforth stands in the company of our great public theologiansPaul Tillich, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the brothers Niebuhras he envisions both religious and political practices that enable our better selves. Political participation, pursued well, cultivates generosity and patience, and is good for the soul. What better remedy for mending our broken politics?Charles Marsh, Commonwealth Professor of Religious Studies, University of Virginia

Praise for The Relevance of Religion Using well-supported arguments deriving from his ministerial as well as legal background, Danforth asserts that traditional religious values of sacrifice, selflessness and a commitment to the greater good can and should have prominent roles in Americas politics. While much of his tone is positive, Danforth doesnt refrain from criticizing modern politicians, far-right Christian activists and what he calls a coarsening, increasingly self-centered society. . . . Danforths arguments are staunchly supported and clearly explained. . . . For anyone who is faithful as well as political, he provides much food for thought.St. Louis Post-DispatchIn The Relevance of Religion, John Danforth does his country another service after many. His book is both a serious critique of politicized religion and a strong defense of religions indispensable role in our common life. 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The Relevance of Religion will surely become a permanent fixture in my courses on religion and politics. What better remedy for mending our broken politics?Charles Marsh, Commonwealth Professor of Religious Studies, University of Virginia Praise for John Danforths Faith and Politics Few Americans bring more experience in both religion and politics to the table than Danforth, an Episcopalian priest and a former senator, ambassador to the United Nations, and special envoy to Sudan, where he helped broker the accord ending a long civil war that had taken on overtones of a Christian-Muslim religious conflict. His current book is both a plea and a warning.Foreign Affairs Essential reading for Americans trying to move beyond the corrosive standoff between the religious right and the secular left.The Washington Post Danforth brings exceptional insight to the debate about the political use of religion and the separation of church and state. . . . This incredibly thoughtful book will give pause to readers of all political and religious beliefs.Booklist (starred review) Danforth, a Missouri Republican as well as a lawyer and Episcopal minister, tended to avoid nasty partisan politics during his three terms in the U.S. Senate. . . . Danforth comes across as a welcome paragon of virtue.Publishers WeeklyAbout the AuthorJohn Danforth graduated from Princeton University, Yale Divinity School, and Yale Law School. He practiced law in New York City and St. Louis before serving as attorney general of Missouri, United States senator from Missouri, and United States representative to the United Nations. An ordained Episcopal priest, he is the author ofFaith and Politics and Resurrection: The Confirmation of Clarence Thomas. He lives in St. Louis.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.CHAPTER ONEA PERSONAL QUESTIn the spring of 1959, I walked into the office of Professor Browne Barr having heard from other students that he was the most pastoral teacher at Yale Divinity School. I was intent on baring my soul. I had entered the divinity school believing that God intended me for the parish clergy or for teaching religion, but I was now in a vocational crisis, dreading either career path and knowing that I lacked both the temperament of a pastor and the abstract mind of a theologian. My future seemed unbearable, and being surrounded by dedicated and contented classmates deepened my gloom.Before my senior year in college, my aim was politics, as it had been since age ten when, sitting in the gallery of the U.S. Senate I told myself, I want to do that someday. As a schoolboy, I signed up for every activity that was at all political: debates in the school assembly, mock nominating conventions, the model UN. I loved it. Everyone knew of my passion for politics, my parents who encouraged me and my classmates who nicknamed me Senator. Then came college, where I majored in religion and became convinced that God wanted me to have a future in the ministry.I entered Professor Barrs office in a quandary. God must have wanted me for the ministry or I would not have been at Yale. But did I have to do something I dreaded? Could I change course and resume the political path I loved, or was I compelled to stick it out at divinity school because to do otherwise would be disobedient to God?Professor Barr barely looked up from his desk, never invited me to sit down, and interrupted me two or three minutes into my speech, saying, God doesnt expect you to walk around on your knees if you dont want to. And that was it. End of meeting. He never explained what he meant. Was he telling me that God never wants us to do what we dont enjoy? That seemed unimaginable, as the Gospels teach us that disciples do what no one would want toleave home and family, pick up our crosses, even die. So why should it be okay for me to choose politics over the ministry just because politics would give me more pleasure than, say, calling on the sick? My decision to shift to law school, then to politics, was selfish, based on my personal likes and dislikes. Maybe I should feel guilty about that, but I must admit that I have never for a minute regretted the decision. I would have been a terrible pastor.That said, I didnt think then, and dont think now, that I should brush off my supposed call to the ministry as though it never happened. I did major in religion in college and ended up graduating from Yale with degrees in both law and divinity. Although I have never been in the full-time parish ministry, I was ordained into the priesthood of the Episcopal Church. Surely there must be some connection between my theological education and ordination on one hand and politics, which has been such a big part of my life, on the other. My life shouldnt be neatly compartmentalized between what I believe and what I do. So for nearly sixty

years I have been trying to work out in my mind the relevance of my religion to my politics.One particular question has been on my mind since as a college senior I read the work of the great twentieth-century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr taught that the standard for Christian ethics is Christs sacrificial death on the Cross. We should love one another as Christ loves us. Yet Niebuhr was realistic about human behavior. In the real world, we are seldom sacrificial. We further our own interests, and we create political systems that balance our competing interests and protect us from each other as each tries to advance his or her own causes. Politics is about balancing power, not practicing sacrificial love. Indeed, Niebuhr believed that if a political system were to practice the Love Commandment, say through pacifism, the consequence would be injusticethe dominance by the strong and fierce over the weak. Nevertheless, Niebuhr thought that while the Love Commandment could not be implemented as a plan for governing, it remained relevant as a standard for politics. Ever since I was a college senior, I have wondered how this could be so.This book is an attempt to find out where I am in my own thinking in the hope that my struggle will help others think about the relationship between their faith and how they go about their lives as citizens and their engagement in politics.The fact that after all these years Im still trying to work out how my faith should affect my approach to politics shows that I have never come up with easy answers. It hasnt been as though a friend has asked, Well, Jack, what do your religious beliefs mean for your politics? and I could spontaneously say, The answer is X, Y, and Z. I never thought that my religion should govern specific Senate votes on, say, tax or appropriations bills, and I dont recall any constituent suggesting that it should. Some people on the left and the right have claimed to be able to do what I could not. They have drawn causal connections between their understanding of religion and their positions on particular issues. Many conservatives have done this on social issues, saying that their religion compels opposition to abortion, embryonic stem cell research, and same-sex marriage. Many liberals have claimed that the religious mandate to care for the poor and sick leads directly to support for government welfare and health care programs. While its important to measure all that I do, including my politics, against the demands of my faith, I have found it difficult to draw straight lines between the creeds I believe and the policies I support. On the contrary, I am convinced that the sanctification of my political opinions would amount to idolatry that would render it impossible to compromise with others.Its possible to conceive of hypothetical circumstances where we could confidently say that a political position would be contrary to the will of God. A racist platform espoused by neo-Nazis would be an example. But in twenty-first-century America, such opinions are not within the range of serious debate, much less possible implementation. The real world of American politics consists of a series of issues on which good-hearted and reasonable people disagree, issues such as taxes, spending, and Americas role in the world, issues on which vigorous disagreement is normal but moral condemnation would be out of place.Attempts to translate religious beliefs into stands on specific issues are misguided for both religious and political reasons. From the standpoint of religion, it is both presumptuous and idolatrous to claim that ones political opinions are endorsed by God. From the standpoint of politics, such a claim closes debate and forecloses agreement.If faithful people are to mend broken politics, the first step should be to resist the temptation to confuse religion with topical issues and turn belief into political platforms. But thats only the first step. Far more important than trying to influence any specific governmental policy is changing the tone of American politics, bridging differences rather than widening themin short, making what is now a dysfunctional system workable. This healing ministry, not issue advocacy, can and should be the special gift of religion to America.Im not alone in my reluctance to identify political positions with religious beliefs. In their book American Grace, eminent scholars Robert Putnam and David Campbell have used public opinion surveys to show that the linkage of faith and politics by the religious right has led to a dramatic withdrawal by young adults from both formal religion and conservative politics.So it is not my objective to persuade readers that their faith should compel them to be liberals or conservatives, Democrats or Republicans. To the contrary, my conviction that religion and politics are very different realms as well as the need to restore civility to public discourse lead me to a key point. Good and faithful people can vigorously champion opposing views on the most hotly contested issues of our time. Indeed, honoring the motives and the right of good people to disagree with one another is not just important, it is essential.Instead of advancing a polemic for one ideology or another, my intention is to suggest a general approach religious people might take as they think about politicsbroad principles, not specific policies. My hope is that we can join together in a common approach while honoring our differences on the issues of the day.I believe there are four fundamental concepts that faithful people can agree on, regardless of their party affiliation or where they are on the liberal/conservative spectrum. If these principles were to become major themes advanced in our congregations, from our pulpits and by believers, I am convinced that religion would make an important contribution to public discourse, and that we would go a long way toward mending broken politics. The four broad principles are these:1. We should insist that politics remain in its proper place. It is not the realm of absolute truth and it is not the battleground of good and evil. Faithful people worship God. They do not worship political parties or ideologies. Certainly, politics is important and is worth doing well, but the exaggerated claims of politicians that their favored policies will miraculously solve our problems create exaggerated expectations, and perpetually disappointed expectations create public cynicism. Against overwrought rhetoric of talking heads and radio personalities, our message should be, Cool it. Our opponents are not our enemies.2. We should be advocates for the common good. The framers of our

Constitution were realistic in their understanding that politics consists of groups advancing their own interests, and they created a system of checks and balances to offset competing interests against one another. However, our first four presidents believed that the success of America would depend on citizens who did more than look after themselves. Besides promoting our own interests, it is important for Americans to advance the common good. Our early presidents called dedication to the common good virtue. The concept of virtue was based on republican principles, not religion, and without a religious foundation it disappeared as a guiding principle for the nation. Today, politics consists of a competition of economic interests (more benefits or less taxes) plus ideologies largely reflecting those interests (more government or less government). Because the essence of religion is that the self is not the center of the universe, and because the model of Christianity is sacrificial love, religion can restore the lost principle that there is a higher good than the self.3. We should be a unifying force, working to bind America together. One need only read the daily newspaper to know the power of religion to destroy countries; witness the violent confrontation of Sunni and Shiite Muslims in Iraq. Since our earliest days, Americans have been wary of how religion can divide us, and we have seen its divisive power at points in our history. But religion should have just the opposite effect. The words religion and ligament come from the same root meaning to bind together. Jesus prayed for unity among his followers that they may be one (John 17:21), and the Epistle to the Colossians teaches that in Christ all things hold together (Colossians 1:17). Paul said that in Christ, God reconciled the world to himself, and entrusted to us the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:19). A fundamental premise of this book is that overcoming estrangement is the responsibility of faithful people and that God has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation. Because this is so, we should seek ways to make our ministry a practical reality.4. We should advocate political compromise, and make the case that the spirit of compromise is consistent with our faith. There is tremendous pressure from party activists, media personalities, and interest groups for politicians to take uncompromising stands on issues such as taxes and spending, but workable politics is the art of compromise, and the result of inflexible positions is gridlock. Faithful people, who do not think of politics in terms of absolutes, can be a counterpressure to those who pull politicians toward the ideological poles.Focusing on the ministry of reconciliation helps us to see clearly the epicenter of broken politics and our role as a people in widening or healing that break. The epicenter is Congress where I served for eighteen years, that branch of government that in principle enables us to address our differences and live together, but in practice is dysfunctional.When we think about the Constitution, our attention is usually on the first ten Amendments and their protections of our individual liberties. Those protections constitute an essential American value, but they arent the totality of the Constitution. The body of the Constitution furthers a different and also essential value, that of holding together in one nation a diverse and often fractious people. That is why the Preamble begins with the words We the people, as opposed to I the individual. Directing our attention beyond the individual to our common life together is both an American and a religious enterprise. This value of creating one out of many was contested and finally upheld by the Civil War.The principal mechanism the framers of the Constitution devised for holding together a diverse nation was Congress. It would be the branch of government most responsive to the variety of interests that made up America. Congress would be where we would advance our competing causes, find balance, and work out how to proceed as a nation. Congress would determine the federal governments policy on taxes, spending, war, and peace. For James Madison, the more interests engaged in making public policy the better. The aim wasnt that any interest would necessarily prevail on an issue, but that all would be heard, all would be welcome in the political process. If all would have the opportunity to participate in decision making, all would share allegiance to the structure that made their participation possible.Todays controversies differ from those of the late eighteenth century. Slavery no longer divides us, and living in large or small states is of little matter. But we are now a much larger and more diverse country and our political controversies remain intense. The need for a functioning Congress is as great as ever, and therein lies the problem. Congress doesnt work. It isnt a place to present our causes and resolve our differences, so it isnt serving its constitutional purpose of holding America together.Later, we will consider some institutional causes of Congresss dysfunction, including excessive use of the filibuster and unwillingness to vote on controversial issues. But the main culprit behind our broken government isnt the 535 members who serve in Washington; its the public to whom the members respond. We are the culprits when we are so intent on getting our way and so certain of our ideology that we really dont want a structure where others are heard and differences are resolved, and we let our politicians know it. It is to us as citizens and to our intransigence that religion most powerfully speaks.An obvious question is: Whose religion do I mean when discussing religion and politics? I am a Christian, and many of my references will perhaps have more meaning to Christian readers than to others. But my basic thoughts about the transcendence of God over politics, the centrality of the Love Commandment, and the role of religion in connecting us with one another are not uniquely Christian. Indeed, in my experience some of the people who have done the best job of living out the principles I suggest are Jews. So I hope that my own effort to work out the relevance of faith to politics will be helpful to citizens of different faiths as well as competing politics.