

Keeping the Faith

Why faith-based progressivism might not just be possible—but desirable.

GODLY REPUBLIC: A CENTRIST BLUEPRINT FOR AMERICA'S FAITH-BASED FUTURE BY JOHN J. DI IULIO, JR. • UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS • 2007 • 329 PAGES • \$24.95

I should say at the start that John DiIulio and I are fellow Catholics and fellow aspiring do-gooders. He is an accomplished political scientist and public intellectual, a plain-speaker, and a person who practices what he preaches more than most of us do, committing his time, talents, and treasure to the poor and dispossessed, especially those in Philadelphia, where he grew up and still lives. At a time when presidential candidates argue whether or not America is a “Christian nation,” when conservatives look to evangelical ministers to anoint a Republican standard-bearer, and when many liberals seem preoccupied with winning the “faith vote,” DiIulio offers a plan rooted in principles, not politics. In his new book, DiIulio presents an engaging and attractive vision of a “godly republic” and a program of action for a faith-

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friendly civil society. I hope his vision is true, and I hope his arguments garner attention and support—and not just because we are friends.

Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America's Faith-Based Future has two major parts. In the first, DiIulio argues that the United States has been and remains what he calls a “godly republic”—religious, tolerant, and respectful of the requirement of government neutrality with regard to religion. This analysis lays the groundwork for his second argument: that faith-based civil-society organizations have the capacity, and ought to have government support, to tackle the major problems of the disadvantaged in the society. While his reading of religion’s role in American life is accurate, DiIulio’s analysis of the religiosity of Americans almost certainly exaggerates the extent to which faith-based organizations can solve social problems, with or without the support of government. But the narrower argument with which he closes the book, about the potential for specific faith-based interventions in specific urban problems, makes a persuasive case for a new, constrained version of an initiative that many progressives derided under the current administration—and may want to reconsider.

DiIulio distinguishes the notion of a “godly republic” from both a “Christian America” and a purely secular America. Americans, he argues, combine a deep religious commitment with a deep respect for freedom of religion, as well as a sense that government should be neutral with regard to religious practices. His is in part a historical argument—that the idea of the “godly republic” was at the center of the Founders’ vision for the nation. DiIulio then makes a legal argument, concerning the Supreme Court’s line of reasoning in religion cases. Specifically, he posits that the set of religious cases can be read in a way that reveals two themes. The first is that religious freedom includes the freedom to practice either religion or non-religion. The second is that the prohibition on the establishment of religion requires that government be neutral in dealing with both religion and nonreligion. Both his historical and his constitutional analysis lead DiIulio to conclude that there is no requirement that government be secular or that it avoid all dealings with religious organizations, only that it be neutral and scrupulously protective of religious freedom. This basic argument is well-supported in the literature and is persuasive, though it is certainly not the unanimous opinion of historians and constitutional scholars.

But precise resolution of the historical and constitutional arguments is less important than understanding religion in contemporary American politics and society. And here there is considerable agreement among sociologists and political scientists, who rely on extensive polling data and diverse qualitative studies to paint a picture very consistent with DiIulio’s. The vast majority of

Americans identify themselves as religious, and within that majority a majority is Christian. Whether or not the Founders envisioned religion in the public square, it is clearly there now and will remain, since for so many Americans religion is both an important (for some the most important) aspect of their identity and also the foundation of their values and commitments. Banishing religion from public life is probably not possible, and also not necessary, as the religious majority of Americans is basically pluralist and more or less tolerant. They claim to base their morality in their religion and expect their public officials to be religious (presumably as a marker of good character), but by and large the polls show that Americans want these same officials to do their work in service of the people, not in service of particular religious ideas. Even those who think we are or ought to be an explicitly “Christian” nation (and many evangelicals, among others, express this sentiment) mostly believe, as sociologist Christian Smith has documented in his book *Christian America?*, that such a nation still ought to respect the freedom of religion and conscience of all.

Alan Wolfe, a savvy chronicler of the contemporary religious landscape, supports DiIulio’s assessment in most respects. His interviews with a wide variety of people, reported in his book *The Transformation of American Religion*, present a picture of religion that is neither particularly doctrinal nor particularly demanding. For most Americans, God is benign, non-judgmental, and inclusive. Attending church or synagogue builds self-esteem and social capital, as well as a vague sense of communing with something beyond ourselves and doing the right thing. American religious sentiments, as expressed in Wolfe’s interviews, are remarkably tolerant, flexible, and pragmatic, further suggesting that we need not worry too much about religion’s poisoning of politics. Wolfe’s interviews also reveal, however, that American religion is not very serious. This is a very important, and somewhat disturbing, finding when one considers DiIulio’s belief in the power of faith-based organizations.

In the second part of the book, DiIulio, who served as the first director of Bush’s White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, makes an argument similar to that made by his former boss during the 2000 presidential campaign regarding the need for and utility of faith-based organizations. To DiIulio, the plight of the disadvantaged in America is a moral scandal and a threat to the well-being of the nation, and that there exists, in faith-based, grassroots, community-serving organizations, the capacity and the will to address the needs of the disadvantaged in potentially transformative ways. Most of this capacity, he argues, rests in a faith-based sector that, as Wolfe, Smith, and others demonstrate, by and large accepts well-established principles of religious neutrality. Finally, he

argues that this capacity has been systematically underappreciated and underused by government and other funders, and that leveling the playing field for these groups—providing funding under conditions that ensure that public funds are not supporting proselytizing or religious discrimination—could unleash a significant amount of spiritual capital to address serious urban problems.

This is the logic behind “charitable choice,” and the logic behind DiIulio’s short and eventful tenure in the White House. As DiIulio candidly and often humorously admits in the book, the politics behind charitable choice has not always conformed to the logic of its design. Congress could not reach agreement on a charitable choice bill because of arguments over discrimination and hiring preferences, disagreements which, according to DiIulio, should have been easily resolvable. Some Cabinet agencies expanded their grant-making to religious organizations, but not always with the transparency and performance orientation that the program requires. And some in the White House (though not, according to DiIulio, the President) saw the faith-based initiative more as a vehicle for rewarding politically supportive evangelicals than for helping the poor, a fact that led to DiIulio’s high-profile departure.

Polls show that Americans want officials to do their work in service of the people, not in service of particular religious ideas.

DiIulio contends that these political responses are not inherent in a charitable choice regime, particularly one that had relatively limited, targeted funding. The program was poorly run and used for political purposes by the Bush White House, but that does not mean the idea behind it was a bad one. Moreover, DiIulio argues persuasively that secular concerns over an erosion of church-state divisions could be overcome by forbidding discrimination in service provision and hiring along with requiring that public funds be both scrupulously accounted for and segregated so that they are not used for religious purposes. These faith-based organizations, in DiIulio’s vision, would be held accountable for producing the services the public wants.

If DiIulio’s were a general vision for solving the social problems of the country, it would have to be dismissed as unrealistic. As previously noted, the religious commitment of America is not particularly serious; this extends to commitments of time and energy as well as to dogma and liturgy. What Americans do at church, in addition to worship, is socialize and participate in relatively undemanding community activities. As Mark Chaves in his *Congregations in America* found, while a majority of congregations do report providing some social services, only a small minority of congregants participate in them, and they are mostly of the

occasional collect-cans-for-the-food-pantry or serve-soup-at-the-homeless-shelter variety. In general, the activities of congregations, even the famously active mega-churches, mostly serve the emotional, social, and spiritual needs of their members. The picture of congregational activity that one gleans from the studies is analogous to the picture of religion in America: nice, harmless, but self-involved and not very serious. Such a sector, however well-intentioned, won't save society.

But DiIulio is not arguing that vast armies of compassion are ready to be mobilized to solve the whole array of social problems plaguing the country, if only they had access to more federal funds. Instead, he has a particular problem in his sights and a particular range of congregational activities he is advocating, and both grow out of his roots in and commitment to tackling poverty in Phila-

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delphia. These include the devastation of the African-American community by crime, the large-scale incarceration of young black men, and the damage done to children when their families are torn apart.

Certainly in terms of the problem, DiIulio is focusing on a phenomenon that is terribly important and madden-

ingly difficult to solve. But the critical point is that he is not thinking wishfully, but rather speaking from experience. In Philadelphia, DiIulio has helped to build faith-based approaches that have real promise. One is the congregation-based Amachi program for mentoring children of prisoners; another is Prison Fellowship, which inspires and helps prisoners transform their lives through religious devotion. These religiously grounded programs appear to be more successful than most approaches, in part due to the motivation and commitment of the volunteers they recruit, to the ways those volunteers see the humanity and potential of those they work with, and to the relationships they build. These are not casual, relatively low-interaction weekend activities like soup kitchens and clothing drives. Nor do they require massive congregational participation. Rather, they rely on a smaller number of motivated volunteers to spend the immense amount of time needed to build the sort of committed, respectful, one-on-one relationships that are crucial to the programs' success.

What DiIulio wants is more of these. He wants more African-American congregations to mobilize their adult members as mentors for their children. He wants more evangelical churches to partner with inner-city congregations to supplement their human and financial resources. He wants more people of

faith to fulfill the biblical command of visiting those in prison. (He also clearly wants an administration that will avoid needless battles over the separation of church and state by keeping their rhetoric chastened and their goals realistic.) These models of faith-based involvement require more intensity, commitment, and personal interaction than most congregational service programs currently exhibit. But DiIulio believes that help to the needy is required by the biblical faiths; he believes that religious America can and ought to be called to practice what it preaches; and he believes that a large enough minority of religious Americans will answer this call to make a difference.

His commitment to a constrained form of charitable choice grows directly from his belief that public support is needed to turn religious commitment into practical results. Effective programs like Amachi are low-cost, but not free. They need an infrastructure for administration and monitoring, in addition to volunteers. Thus the case for federal support. Moreover, DiIulio argues that federal funding of programs of this sort could be extremely cost-effective and that it could be done in a way that respects and enforces the neutrality rules that are required by the First Amendment. He would allocate such funding to the biggest problems (like the collateral damage from incarceration in inner-city communities), and to the most effective programs that agree to play by the rules of nondiscrimination, spending public money only for secular purposes, and being held accountable for publicly specified results. Government would not abdicate its role in social welfare; rather, it would amplify its effectiveness in the most intractable of problems through partnerships with some faith-based and community groups.

DiIulio's is an attractive vision of a religious but pluralist and tolerant America turning its values into action. In contrast to others, his vision is appropriately constrained and modest, one that might actually succeed if it were tried. DiIulio is quite honest in admitting that his vision was not realized in the White House office that he briefly headed: It was much more political and much less scrupulous about the rules than he thought appropriate. It was also much more grandiose in its rhetoric, implying (if not directly saying) that faith could and should replace government in meeting social needs.

The cynics among us, or those who believe in original sin, could read in DiIulio's description of the operation and politics of the Bush initiative confirmation that the attractive vision will never in fact be tried. Others could read DiIulio's prescriptions as a bypass around the wall between church and state. But the progressive case is ill-served by succumbing to this skepticism. The religiosity of America is an empirical fact; it cannot be ignored, nor should it

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be. Instead, progressives should be open to the potential of a well-designed partnership between government agencies and religious bodies which can, at least in theory, unleash the underutilized compassionate energy of religious civil society. Done at the right scale and in a way that respects religious freedom, such programs can improve the lot of the needy—a goal shared by believers and non-believers alike. **D**