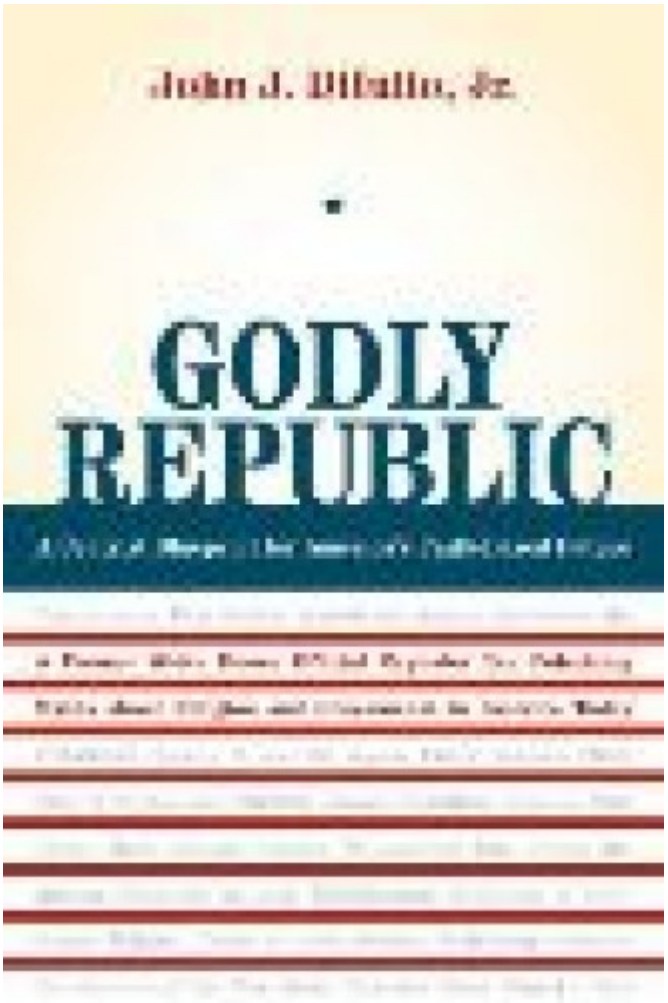
Neither secular nor sectarian

By Allen D. Hertzke in the January 29, 2008 issue

In Review



Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America's Faith-Based Future

John Dilulio Jr.
University of California Press

This enlightening book can be read on several levels. It is an account of John DiIulio's personal odyssey from University of Pennsylvania professor and policy wonk to White House "faith czar." It highlights and celebrates the many faith-based ministries that serve the nation's poor and dispossessed. It chronicles the history of government partnerships with religious social service organizations, culminating in the battle over George W. Bush's faith-based initiative. Finally, it is a meditation on church-state relations by a self-described centrist who believes that America's unique tradition offers a way to transcend polarizing myths about religion and government.

A traditional Catholic from the ethnic streets of Philadelphia, DiIulio, who describes himself as a pro-life and pro-poor Democrat, found himself at the center of a Republican president's "compassionate conservative" agenda. How he got there is instructive. As a young scholar DiIulio made a name for himself in the early 1990s as a get-tough hard-liner on crime, demanding more punishment and incarceration. Ironically, it was a debate with Charles Colson, former hatchet man for Richard Nixon and born-again founder of Prison Fellowship, that began to awaken in DiIulio the more charitable side of his Catholic identity. As DiIulio describes it, Colson and some black Pentecostal ministers turned him into a "Philly-based civic do-gooder."

With this "renewed Catholic heart," DiIulio developed a broader interest in the policy implications of the work of "Matthew 25 Christians"—those who minister to the "least of these," people trapped in poverty or addiction. He began conducting research into the work of urban churches that deal with the toughest social problems, especially the problems afflicting the nation's most vulnerable children. He was struck by how little the academic community appreciated this vital work, and he was impressed with the fruitful partnerships between various governments and faith-based ministries. So he became a celebrator of the idea of expanding such partnerships. Aware of how the federal government often operated by proxy through grants to local nonprofit organizations, DiIulio saw enormous potential in increased federal investment in the work of faith-based providers.

This research and advocacy gave DiIulio considerable visibility as the 2000 presidential election geared up. What is often forgotten is that he served as a consultant to both Al Gore and George W. Bush. Indeed, it was Gore who, on DiIulio's advice, first proposed expanding federal financial support for faith-based charities.

When George W. Bush assumed the presidency and made the faith-based initiative his signature domestic policy, it was not surprising that he tapped DiIulio to head the newly created White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. This thrust DiIulio into the maelstrom of West Wing politics, partisan battles, religious divisions, and competing visions of the proper relationship between government and the faith-based sector.

To help the reader understand the substance and politics of the faith-based initiative, DiIulio delves into the history of partnerships between government and religious nonprofit organizations. He notes that such collaboration, especially at the state and local level, goes back a long way in American history. What has changed is the expansion of federal grant programs and the complexity of the problems they address.

As DiIulio recounts, the impetus for expanded collaboration between the federal government and the faith-based sector came from the welfare reform legislation that President Clinton signed in 1996. A provision of that legislation, sponsored by then–Missouri senator John Ashcroft, prohibited the government from discriminating against faith-based groups that compete for grants to provide such services as drug and alcohol treatment, child care, job training and welfare-to-work programs. This charitable-choice provision set a precedent that could be expanded to other programs, and the policy was endorsed in principle by Gore, George W. Bush and Hillary Clinton.

If this policy initiative enjoyed such bipartisan support, why has it generated so much controversy during the Bush administration? Why did congressional legislation to enact the initiative seem ill-fated from the start? DiIulio provides a bird’s-eye account of what went wrong. In brief, DiIulio argues that the initiative became ensnared in a polarizing clash between purists in both the evangelical and secular camps. Evangelical purists pressed for legislation that would fund “faith-saturated” programs that mix religious instruction with charitable work or that allow religious preferences in hiring. Secular hard-liners fought any effort to level the playing field so faith-based agencies could compete for federal grants, even if the programs in question did not involve proselytization.

But the program also suffered from political exploitation. White House aides, to DiIulio’s chagrin, seemed more interested in photo opportunities with black preachers than in actually refining policies that could pass Congress. On this point,

DiIulio's account echoes David Kuo's lamentation over the politicization of religion in the White House.

In his rhetoric Bush spoke often of harnessing the "armies of compassion" to attack the ills of society, but that vision proved difficult to realize with federal grants. As an alternative, Bush could have proposed a new tax credit for contributions to nonprofit charities. In contrast to the modest $1-2 billion available in potential grants, a credit for millions of taxpayers would pour many billions into faith-based agencies, including international relief and development organizations. Since the money would flow from private citizens, few entangling strings would be attached; faith-saturated nonprofits would qualify along with secular organizations. But because this would result in a loss of revenue to the federal government, it collided with Bush's fiscal agenda of reducing tax rates and eliminating the estate tax. Serving the business class crowded out meaningful compassionate conservatism.

This brings us to the heart of DiIulio's broader argument about the role of religion in public life. Drawing on the thought of key founders, particularly James Madison and Benjamin Franklin, DiIulio suggests that from the start the United States was neither a Christian nation nor a secular republic. Rather, it was envisioned as a "godly republic" that promoted religious freedom and pluralism and encouraged all religious institutions to participate fully in public life. This view echoes John Meacham's argument in his recent book *American Gospel*: that religion shapes our public life without strangling it. In charting the evolution of this concept of the godly republic, DiIulio discerns more coherence in church-state law than critics of the Supreme Court often observe. To him the Court has generally pursued a doctrine of benign neutrality in upholding the vision of a godly republic.

Because he sees danger in the clash of extreme secularism and narrow sectarianism, DiIulio offers a blueprint for negotiating a middle way in accord with what he believes is the historical mainstream of American civic life. In this vision, government is based not on secular values or Christian theology, but on a welcoming religious pluralism. The law does not allow government support for worship, but it does allow religious expression in public spaces. Neither religious conservatives nor secular liberals have really succeeded in getting the government to do their bidding; equal protection reigns. Sectarian triumphalism and secular extremism are not causing common ground to shrink; common ground lies in civic ecumenism. Empirical research has yet to prove the overall superiority of either faith-based or secular charities; it does show that faith-based agencies effectively

mobilize volunteers and bring distinctive qualities to the civic table.

Claiming the middle ground is a time-worn strategy of debate and remonstrance, and DiIulio does it adroitly. But there are tensions in this attempt; his middle way is too neat. For example, he writes that the nation's "civic capital" is embedded in "faith-based volunteer mobilization," not in "faith-saturated spiritual transformation." But DiIulio's personal life and narrative illustrate the civic contribution of spiritual transformation. And he pledges to donate his book royalties not only to faith-inspired programs like Amachi, which matches mentors with children of prisoners, but also to faith-saturated ministries like Prison Fellowship and Teen Challenge.

DiIulio is obviously not averse to personally contributing to religious organizations that hire only fellow believers, but in his White House post he resisted efforts by the Salvation Army to retain that right in grant-funded programs. To him the middle way allows parachurch organizations to follow such hiring preferences only if they forgo federal funds. But that eliminates from public support a potentially wide swath of nonprofit organizations. Such a delicate parsing of policy illuminates again why federal inducements for charitable giving—rather than grants with strings attached—may be the best long-term strategy to harness for civic ends the humanitarian impulse of American religionists. The road not taken still beckons.