

“Yes, God is real”: A Born-Again Public Intellectual Reflects on Catholic Faith in Reason and Community

A Conversation with John DiIulio

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Hevelone: You call yourself a “born-again Catholic in the Jesuit and Pentecostal traditions.” Could you say a bit more about what those four descriptors mean, and how you see them as being related?

DiIulio: The Catholic part of it is probably the easiest part, although, for most people, it would probably be the most complicated part. I’m a cradle Catholic. I have never thought of myself as anything other than a Catholic. Even when I wasn’t going to church or very serious about religion (any religion—including Catholicism), I never went through a phase where I rejected the Church. I had my complaints and so forth like everybody else—or just about everybody else—but I have always considered myself Catholic, the way I consider myself born Italian and working class.

The born-again part—which is linked to the Pentecostal—is a little more complicated. Around Palm Sunday in 1996 I resolved that my work on “faith-based” initiatives was not going to be, or remain, mainly an academic or professional occupation. It was going to be a life’s work in the sense that I would make it a vocation. I also resolved that I would try not to make any money off it. If I received an honorarium or its equivalent, I’d make sure that if it was received through dealing with religion or religious nonprofits that serve the poor, I would fork the honoraria over.

One of the more powerful evangelical influences at this time was the Pentecostal tradition—especially the black Pentecostal tradition, and within that the Church of God in Christ. In places like Philadelphia, that means pastors like Benjamin Smith and churches like Deliverance Evangelistic Church. They are part of a Holy Spirit, Pentecostal, high-octane tradition, and that wing of the black church really got into my soul.

It did not lead me, however, to become a Pentecostal. It led me back to my Catholic faith and to the Jesuits, who seemed to me to have almost absolutely everything right. Through the example of St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Jesuits demonstrated St. James’ notion that faith without works is dead: Do it, show it, don’t just tell it. Also, the idea of having to be spiritually disciplined enough so as to act in the way that Christ would have you act—in compassion and truth. You don’t have to spend all your time being pious and praying—you can actually witness through your works.

Hevelone: How do you shift that to the arena of public policy and public life?

DiIulio: For me, it has meant that I am somewhat radically committed to the idea that sacred places should serve civic purposes, and that any government support for religious nonprofit organizations has to be ecumenical; it must be open to religious, secular, public and private. It is incumbent upon those of us who do have faith convictions and who participate in the public square to be nonsectarian in that context, to accept Methodists, Muslims, Mormons, Quakers, Catholics, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, Anglicans and atheists.

Subsidiarity is a nice Catholic doctrine that travels well as a bridge to policy and public life. It says charity begins at home—it should start with the individual, the family, the church. If they don't work, then we move into local and state government; if necessary, we call upon the national government, but always with a mind toward having it help you deliver assistance in a way that's up-close and personal, if and when possible.

Hevelone: In your newest book, *Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America's Faith-Based Future*, you encourage bipartisan conversations about social justice that will lead to action from people of all faiths, and of no faith. Where do you see these conversations happening today, and where should they be happening?

DiIulio: They should happen, for example, among people who recognize human need in New Orleans. Whether we come from a secular humanist liberal position, an evangelical conservative Christian position, or something else, we can all equally and alike see that we have an entire American city suffering immensely. Eighty percent of New Orleans flooded, but the low-income African-Americans were especially hard hit. The human, physical, and financial recovery process has been going on for three years and will continue for at least another seven to ten years. In addition, a huge influx of Mexican immigrants and Latino workers have brought new needs for immigration relief services. The entire city needs strength and support from the civil society sector and the religious sector.

That's the conversation we need to have. Showing good faith by doing good works in common sounds like a very Catholic formula—and maybe it is—but I have actually seen it with my own eyes, and it does seem to work.

Hevelone: The sub-subtitle of your book says that you explore ten polarizing myths about religion and government in America today. Could you give me an example or two of these myths?

DiIulio: The big ones are the competing myths that America is either a Christian nation or a completely secular state, and that the Founders intended it to be so. In truth, it's neither of those things. I say it's a "Godly republic," which means that it is a governmental system that, as Justice William O. Douglas said in 1952, "presupposes a Supreme Being"—and not just any supreme being, but the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus, and Mohammed. Having presupposed that Supreme Being, however, it denies that citizenship, rights, privileges, or immunities should be contingent upon any particular expression of religious faith.

The remarkable thing about this republic is that it was largely framed by people who were not Enlightenment-minded theists like Thomas Jefferson, or even faith-friendly agnostics like Benjamin Franklin, but rather by people who were more like James Madison, George Washington, and even John Witherspoon. Though these men had beliefs ranging from a weak attachment to Christianity to very strong attachments to a particular Anglo-Protestant worldview, they nonetheless saw fit to have a constitution that proscribed religious tests or qualifications for holding office, that had a First Amendment to keep—at least in their time—the national government out of the business of establishing religion, that called for no fetters in the free exercise of religion, and so on. They understood better than we do in our day that no faith is beyond faction, including their own.

Hevelone: How do you assess the current state of faith-based initiatives in the United States? Do you have any policy recommendations?

DiIulio: Well, I think the good news is that the concept of “faith-based”—the term itself—is permanently in the policy vernacular. When I started talking about it in the early to mid-90s, I’d see blank stares or weird looks. Now people at least know what it is. They may not like it or understand it, but they have heard of it, and I don’t think it’s going away.

A second bit of good news is that about three-dozen state governors, and scores of mayors, have created their own Offices of Faith-based and Community Initiatives, or other offices with similar functions but different names. In some cases they’re very serious operations, in other cases they are the third collateral duty of some deputy assistant mayor, and of course there’s everything in between. These offices, however, didn’t exist ten years ago—or even five years ago—and they exist now, and I think that’s largely a positive thing.

The third thing is that there is now a greater mindfulness about the sheer amount of social service delivery that religious non-profit organizations do. Not just the big ones like Catholic Charities or Salvation Army or Lutheran Social Services, but also the small community-based urban congregations that in many cities are primary suppliers of myriad social services. They do these services without any public money, any philanthropic support, and also without discriminating against beneficiaries on the basis of religion. This is a very happy tale.

The not-so-good news is, first, that the number of such organizations that are now receiving actual governmental support—whether financial, technical, etc.—has increased only very slightly. Second, those organizations that were interested five or six or seven years ago have now been, if not somewhat demoralized, then somewhat demobilized. Third, some extraordinarily good ideas, like ones involving the creation of an adult mentoring program to help the two million children who on any given day have a mom or dad incarcerated, have not really been implemented to the fullest. Nevertheless, I am cautiously optimistic. I think the next president—whoever he or she may be—will take up this issue. They will, of course, give it their own accent and emphasis, but will—I hope—do what’s in the interest of serving low-income

children and families by drawing on the assets of these faith-based groups, especially in urban areas.

Hevelone: I know you are deeply concerned about the well-being of prisoners and their families. Could you talk a bit about how you became interested and invested in those populations, and what you think Americans should do on their behalf?

DiIulio: I spent a good chunk of the 1980s and early 1990s studying prisoners and prisons and being a very hard-line guy on the subject. I never gave much thought to the fact that the people who end up in prisons often are people who begin life sinned against rather than sinning. That doesn't excuse the criminal act; there are plenty of bad people in the world. But I spent a great deal of time working with pre-sentencing investigation reports, which often begin with a tale of neglect, abuse, and the unbelievably bad things that happen in people's lives. At that point in my life I ignored all that information, and stayed focused on trying to lock some of these people up, to see if we couldn't drive down the crime rate.

And indeed, we locked a lot of people up, and we drove down the crime rate. But by the mid-1990s, when I started doing more of the work in these religious organizations and faith-based groups, it became ever clearer to me that if incarceration is the answer, what's the question? The question might be how you can drive crime down a bit, but it couldn't possibly be how to do it cost-effectively or at acceptable human and financial cost. There is a human dimension to incarceration, a family and community dimension, that I had largely ignored. My research focus was in part defined by an utter lack of any spiritual lens through which to view this social issue.

As I evolved into the faith-based work, I remained interested in the criminal justice dimension, but turned more to the question of how do you deal with ex-prisoners. I was very happy to see the President finally sign the Second Chance Act last week, with hundreds of millions of dollars behind it. They blew the dust off that one—it's been sitting there for five years—but I'm happy he did it. The mentoring program for the children of prisoners, to which the President allocated over \$100 million, has made some progress—depending who does the math. There have been up to 70,000 to 100,000 matches of mentors to children – not that there are that many at any given time now. That's not bad, but we need to get to a million. If we can get to a million active matches, available on any given day—which would cost a billion dollars a year (a quarter from philanthropic sources, a quarter from local and state governments, and 50% from the federal government)—I think we would have, not only a potentially transformational impact on the lives of a lot of severely at-risk, low-income, urban children, but also a transformational impact on communities because you break the cycle of incarceration and violence and poverty. I think we need more of these types of programs.

Hevelone: You have had wide range of positions throughout your professional life: professor, political advisor, researcher, public policy advocate. What lessons have you discovered over your years of doing these various things? How would you appropriate these lessons for a community like Boston College that is committed to

the Catholic, Jesuit way of life? What particular insight can you offer about the relationship between religion and public service from your experience?

DiIulio:

This may sound like a funny way to put it, but I think one lesson is that there is no way to wholesale human relationships. Everything has to be done at the retail level—up close and personal—when at all possible. I realize you can't meet and greet everybody, every day, but you've got to understand how the program will impact the lives of the people who stand to benefit the most. This holds true whether you're doing social program development or implementation; or framing a public policy that's going to impact simultaneously hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives; or simply trying to give money in a way that leverages resources to reap lots more social or civic good. If you don't know the people affected, it rarely—if ever—goes well.

This is not to say that everybody needs to work in a soup kitchen, or be a Big Brother or Big Sister, or get involved in a youth volunteer adoption partnership program, or anything of the kind. But it is to say that the same sensibility and the same prudence and wit that you bring to bear on your everyday life—whether as a businessperson, or as a research scholar, or as an administrator, or whatever your wealth or excellence or endeavor—you need to keep your wits about you and apply the same prudence to the task of helping others. This doesn't happen automatically, and none of these programs or policies are self-implementing or self-executing, and, often, the devil is in the details.

Secondly, there is no more powerful way to express, in my humble opinion, what Catholicism at its best means, than to see 500 students in Appalachia doing service projects for their spring break or 200 students working in New Orleans during spring break with faculty, staff, and students. The conversations about almost any aspect of what it means to be a Catholic, or conversations on Catholic identity, or Catholic social teaching, or Catholic doctrine, or subsidiarity, or solidarity, or preferential love for the poor—whatever it is, it's more meaningful if you're engaged in some sort of Christ-like activity.

The romantic image of Boston College students going down, say, to New Orleans or other service venues and doing service, working together in the day and then reading Augustine by candlelight may be a bit much. But boy, Augustine and lots of other things take on a lot more meaning when you're dealing viscerally with life dramas and problems to which you're making an affirmative commitment. It is not just talk about, where does this idea of preferential love for the poor come from, but the reality of spending eight hours a day doing it together, and maybe doing it in interfaith and ecumenical partnerships, and then spending the evening talking about it and debriefing and reflecting. I don't think there's anything better. Romans 8:28, to me, is a counsel to do such work, and do it in public-private and religious-secular partnerships: "All things work together for good for those who love God and act according to His purpose." Somebody say amen.

[End of transcript]