

How FDR redefined charity in 1933

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In March 1933, the United States stood on the brink of ruin. Twenty-five percent of the population was unemployed; many people had not worked for several years. The situation was even worse in cities with major industries, where unemployment surpassed the national average.

Yet the real worry of the era cannot be captured by statistics alone. There was a sense of fear that was palpable to those who lived in this uncertain time. As historian Ira Katznelson puts it, "Hope proved elusive. The rumble of deep uncertainty, a sense of proceeding without a map, remained relentless and enveloping. Nothing was sure." This was the situation Franklin Delano Roosevelt inherited when he was inaugurated that month as the 32nd president.

The challenge before Roosevelt was of such immensity that only the Bible captured for him, and for much of the nation, the task ahead. As he delivered his inaugural address in the cool March air, under overcast skies, the new president offered his listeners a story of devastation and redemption drawn directly from scripture. The economy was in tatters and hardworking men and women were destitute. "Primarily this is because the rulers of the exchange of mankind's goods have failed, through their own stubbornness and their own incompetence, have admitted their failure, and abdicated," Roosevelt [told the crowd](#) in Washington, D.C. Like the biblical story of Jesus forcibly expelling the moneychangers and merchants from the Temple, he promised to restore Christian morality to the nation:

The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths. The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit.

Of all the ancient truths Roosevelt crusaded to restore, the most important and the most radical was charity. As he was sworn in by Supreme Court chief justice Charles Evans Hughes, Roosevelt placed his hand on an old, Dutch family Bible, opened to 1 Corinthians 13, which in the King James includes this: “And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.”

Traditionally, Christian charity had meant voluntary giving to the poor. But Roosevelt redefined the term to include giving government aid to the elderly and the invalid, something his Social Security Act would do.

Roosevelt’s words give us a glimpse of a nation that in many ways no longer resembles our own. Roosevelt spoke in Christian idiom, often hinting at anti-Semitic tropes about Jewish bankers, to a public that was presumed to be Protestant. (“This is a Protestant country, and the Catholics and Jews are here under sufferance,” Roosevelt would later tell a private audience that included Jews and Catholics.) The Episcopalian Roosevelt also spoke on behalf of a Protestantism that considered science and religion compatible, pluralism a social good, internationalism a Christian endeavor, and the state an ally of Christian social work. He spoke, in other words, on behalf of an ecumenical Protestantism that dominated the public sphere.

And in so doing, Roosevelt cemented a close working relationship between the leadership of the ecumenically minded denominations—like the Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians—and the federal government. During the early days of the Roosevelt administration, Episcopal priest Elliot Darlington announced, “This is the first time in anyone’s memory that religion is about to be tried on a national scale with all cooperating until each has a share in the national work. The whole program is the realization of a command, ‘Love thy neighbor as thyself.’”

While Roosevelt was not particularly reflective about his religion, he expressed like few others the common-sense belief that ecumenical Protestant leaders would be a natural part of the governing coalition of the United States, which ran the country from the 1930s through the 1970s. And so they were. For many people, including a long line of prominent historians, the New Deal was a quintessentially secular project, one that departed from the moralizing of the past and was marked by experimentation and expertise. But for some, like Darlington, it was an expression of their deepest theological commitments. In the ensuing years, these non-evangelical Protestant denominations would help promote Roosevelt’s policies and make them

palatable for an overwhelmingly religious nation.

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