

Was the New Deal Christian?

By [Mark Edwards](#)

August 11, 2015

*In our "Reflections From the Classroom" series, seasoned teachers talk about their experiences walking with students and guiding their learning.*

There are some advantages to teaching online. Often instructors complain that the online format robs them of give-and-take moments with students. But given the current size of many history survey sections—50, 90, 300, even 500 people—how realistic is it to expect those real-time opportunities for conversation? Online threaded discussions are often more substantive, inclusive, and productive than the traditional classroom format. Not that I ever plan on surrendering classroom time to the false gods of speed and efficiency—online classes are awfully short—but I do want to take their advantages seriously.

I regularly teach an online freshman survey class on the post-Civil War United States, as well as an upper-division online course on 20th-century America. They run about 18 to 24 students. Along with book reviews, and midterms and finals based on audio lectures, students write three to four pages per week responding to discussion questions based on Gary Gerstle's wonderful text [American Crucible](#).

Given the anti-liberal leanings of many Americans today, I always look forward to our week on the New Deal. Remarkably, students have nothing but praise for President Franklin Roosevelt. When asked if the country needed the New Deal, again almost every student outlines and defends the benefits of Social Security and other key federal welfare and development programs. I don't think the uniformity of their reactions stems from a failure to recognize the source of their "big government" discontents. Rather, they highlight that almost all Americans today—reds and blues—believe in the safety net that began with the New Deal.

The real diversity of opinion begins when students take up the "faith and learning" question. I ask, "Was the increase in state and presidential power under the New Deal consistent with Christian principles?" Surveying responses from this last year, it's about 60 to 40 percent in favor of faith in the New Deal. Students praise the New Deal for taking up Christ's mission to help the poor and disabled. They condemn it for usurping God's authority. One person worried that the New Deal violated the separation of church and state. Another argued that it wasn't Christian because it did not help protect minority rights. Finally, some were just thoughtfully unsure what to do with the question. For instance:

*Christian values teach us that work is an essential part of life and to be good stewards of our money. There are many people today who are taking advantage of the welfare and social security programs, but I don't think I can argue against their existence. In life there must be balance. Good things can easily be used for evil purposes; it just depends on the intention of the user. God also commands Christians to take care of the poor, widowed, and orphaned, and the welfare programs in America are in some way helping us to fulfill that command. So it's hard to say if the New Deal and bigger government is Christian or not, I think it depends on the specific situation.*

The diversity of opinion today reflects the mixed feeling of many Christian communities under the New Deal. Depression-ridden Protestants and Catholics liked parts of the New Deal but feared the whole. Thanks to excellent new studies by [Matt Sutton](#) and [Kevin Kruse](#), we know that evangelicals and fundamentalists feared that FDR was hell-bent on destroying God-given liberties and free markets, even as they accepted farm subsidies

and Social Security payments.

And ecumenical Christians were ambivalent in their support. Reinhold Niebuhr eventually welcomed FDR's program as a necessary step toward a more democratic socialist state. At the same time, he repeated popular complaints that FDR was a "political messiah." Niebuhr's coworker, the southern Presbyterian and ecumenical leader Francis Miller, praised New Deal experiments for their potential to modernize his region. Helen, his wife, even worked for the Agricultural Adjustment Association. Together, they penned a book in 1936, *The Blessings of Liberty*, in which they praised New Deal projects yet condemned the "New Deal paradox" of trying to restore self-government by way of totalitarian bureaucracy. What was most needed, they concluded, was to "give democracy a local habitation."

The Millers' response to the New Deal then, and my students' responses now, reminds us that strong-state liberalism has always been a diverse and contested political force. If frequent frustration with the New Deal from the right and left should caution us against triumphal accounts of liberalism, perhaps my students' remembrances can inspire hope that the liberal dream of a more socially just America is far from dead.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#), [Beth Hessel](#), and [John D. Wilsey](#).*