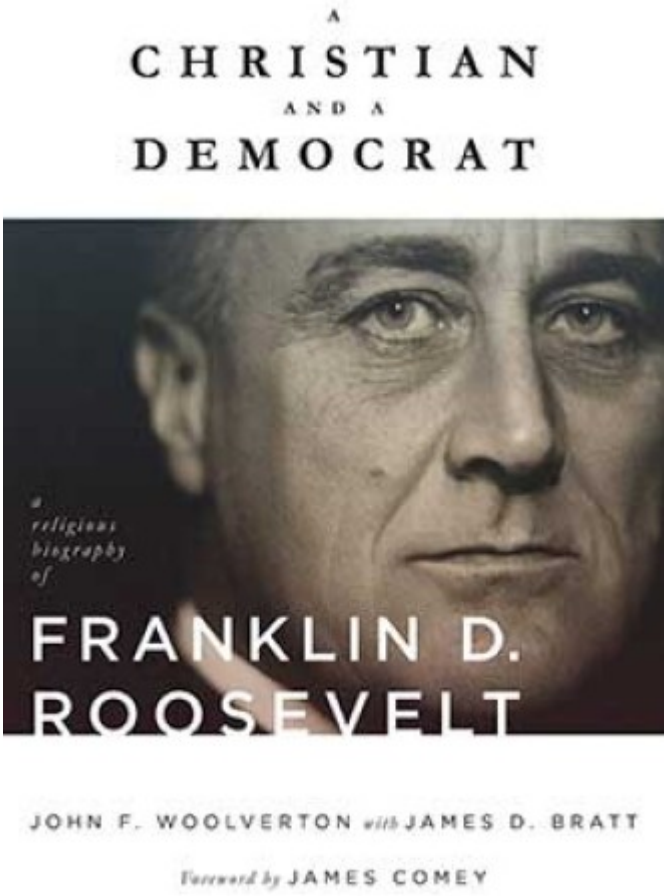
FDR’s faith

John Woolverton addresses a gap in Roosevelt scholarship with elegance and insight.

by Grant Wacker in the November 6, 2019 issue

In Review



A Christian and a Democrat

A Religious Biography of Franklin D. Roosevelt

By John F. Woolverton, with James D. Bratt

Once when a reporter asked President Franklin Delano Roosevelt the source of his political views, he hesitated and then replied, “I’m a Christian and a Democrat.” Years later, a family friend described him to his wife, Eleanor, as “a very simple Christian.” Eleanor raised her eyebrows and responded, “Yes a *very simple* Christian.”

Though American historians often see Roosevelt as one of the nation’s finest presidents, they have paid surprisingly little attention to his religious ideas and practices. John Woolverton addresses that need with impressive erudition, elegant prose, and clear insight into the larger implications of the story. When Woolverton, an Episcopal priest and scholar who taught at Virginia Theological Seminary, died in 2014, he’d nearly finished writing this book. James Bratt, who teaches at Calvin College, completed the volume by cutting some details and adding a moving chapter on FDR’s death and funeral.

Roosevelt’s career offered a capacious stage for the exhibition of his religious instincts. Born in 1882 of patrician parents in Hyde Park, New York, he matriculated at Groton Preparatory School, Harvard College, and Columbia Law School. Though he was an indifferent student academically, his wealth, athleticism, family connections, voracious reading, and charismatic personality opened doors. In due course he became a New York state senator, governor of New York, assistant secretary of the Navy, and four-term president of the United States (the latter two terms unprecedented). He died in April 1945, just months before the end of World War II, at age 63.

And what about religion? Roosevelt was not religious, let alone Christian, in conventional ways. He was not pious, not inclined toward mystic insights, not changed by a conversion experience, and not interested in theological discussions (indeed, he said that he did not like to think about theological matters at all). He attended church erratically. An extramarital affair with a young aide tarnished his personal life. And he showed no mercy toward political opponents.

Yet we need to look deeper. Roosevelt faithfully served as a vestryman of his Hyde Park Episcopal church for 39 years, and as senior warden of the vestry for 23 of them. He supported the church financially, sang the hymns with gusto, read his prayer book regularly (possibly every night), salted his speeches with biblical stories

and metaphors, and commemorated all of his inaugurations as governor and president with his hand resting on the family Bible. Invariably the book was opened to 1 Corinthians 13 and its soaring words about faith, hope, and love. Roosevelt's 1939 State of the Union address was couched in biblical language, and he offered a now-classic prayer on the radio the night of the D-Day landing in 1944.

Most important to this book is the intimate and enduring connection between Roosevelt's private Christian convictions and his public policy endeavors. Woolverton organizes the story in terms of faith, hope, and love.

"Hope" comes first. In the early 1930s, at the outset of the Great Depression, Roosevelt assured a discouraged and fearful nation that Providence would sustain them. One person said that he "blew hope into the deflated body of the country like a boy blowing up a balloon."

The "Love" section describes Roosevelt's herculean efforts in the later years of that decade to turn the economy around. He sought to enlist the powers of all levels of government to secure a range of basic needs: full employment, decent wages for laborers, fair prices for farmers, adequate housing, better education, improved health care, rural electrification, and, above all, the peace of mind that comes when life offers the same predictability for ordinary folk that it offers the elite. Critics mocked the programs, but they became the building blocks of the modern welfare state that most Americans have come to take for granted.

Looking back, both liberals and conservatives would find much to like and dislike in the New Deal. For liberals, Roosevelt adamantly insisted that the time had come to harness the powers of government to work for, not against, the interests of the "forgotten man." For conservatives, he was equally adamant that the unearned handout was demeaning and counterproductive. He aimed to fix capitalism, not abolish it.

The war years called for "Faith." Here Woolverton stretches the common meaning of the term to suggest something more like prophecy. Roosevelt was determined to marshal Christian as well as military resources to fight the deadly menace of fascism and Nazism abroad. Those toxic philosophies not only dehumanized the human race but also threatened to leap their boundaries and invade American shores.

Before Pearl Harbor the anti-interventionist forces, led by the redoubtable aviation hero Charles Lindbergh and a surprisingly large number of intellectuals, artists,

clergy, and business titans, mounted a credible case that Americans needed to tend problems at home before entangling themselves in wars abroad. But Roosevelt's sense of right and wrong, driven by Christian principles of justice for all, steeled his nerve to press for preparedness and, when the time came, all-out combat to win unconditional surrender from the enemy.

A Christian and a Democrat offers delightful surprises. Woolverton's feel for the lilt of the language turns prose into poetry. William James, he tells us, "did not shiver on the shores of faith." And despite its rigors, "Groton was not all cold baths and root canals." Arresting too is Woolverton's eye for memorable quotations. The American people, said Roosevelt, found "eternal simplicities" more meaningful than "the fuzz-buzz of technical talk."

Woolverton's exploration of the this-worldly fortitude and the other-worldly (Episcopal) faith of Eleanor Roosevelt and Roosevelt's secretary of labor, Frances Perkins, heightens our appreciation for both women. And his ruminations, enriched by contemporaneous accounts, on how Roosevelt's confrontation with polio made him humbler, more compassionate, and more pliable rank among the finest passages in the book.

It might seem churlish to find fault with a volume so deeply researched and finely executed. But if a revised edition materializes—and I hope it does—two aspects merit attention. The first is Woolverton's numerous excursions into the thinking of figures of marginal relevance to the main narrative, such as Isaiah Berlin and Søren Kierkegaard. Less would be more. The second problem is that Woolverton speaks too briefly about Roosevelt's sorry role in the establishment of Japanese-American internment camps, his relatively sparse attention to race, and how he squared his marital infidelity with his professed Christian values.

Roosevelt had no qualms about blurring the boundary between church and state. He understood that public policy cannot be divorced from one's deepest values. The question is not whether faith influences political views, but how.

Here Roosevelt took no shortcuts. He did not pretend that his God was just the god of the civil state, July Fourth dressed up in Christian clothes. Roosevelt's God really was the Lord of the Hebrew scriptures, and his Jesus really was the Christ of the New Testament. But he also knew that in a pluralistic society he had to translate those distinctly Christian convictions into the widest possible language of agreement.