Frances Perkins:

Private Faith, Public Policy

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"I came to work for God, FDR and the millions of forgotten, plain, common working men."

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, Michelle Kew has illumined the central place of religious faith in Frances Perkins' consequential role in designing and advancing the essential domestic policies of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. We learn that Miss Perkins (her preferred designation) did not emphasize her Episcopalian faith in public but that in private she relied on the consolation and structured devotion of her religion to help carry the heavy burdens of her public and private responsibilities. Her monthly sessions of prayer and reflection at an Episcopalian retreat center near Washington symbolizes the importance of her religious beliefs and practices to her national leadership in fighting for such essential elements of America's safety net as Social Security, unemployment insurance, workmen's compensation and the minimum wage. She explained that she "came to work for God, FDR and the millions of forgotten, plain, common working men," to which we surely can add women and children.[1]

In writing this essay for the Frances Perkins Center, Michelle Kew, a student at Southern Maine University, has distilled the life of this extraordinary public servant. Drawing upon the major interpretations of Perkins' life and career, this essay will introduce Frances Perkins to those who have not known about her and will confirm for those who have the well springs of her motivation and energy in leading the purposeful, disciplined life that has profoundly influenced succeeding generations of millions of Americans.

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Frances Perkins had a clear vision of her priorities—what God wanted came first. As Secretary of Labor under Franklin Roosevelt, she developed programs that bettered the lives of the American people. These included Social Security, workplace safety regulations, unemployment insurance, worker's compensation, minimum wage laws, and the forty hour work week. Throughout a life spent championing the rights of working people, the poor, children, and the disadvantaged, Perkins used her Christian faith as her guide. When friends asked why it was important for the fortunate to help the poor, she told them, "that it was what Jesus would want them to do." [2]

Raised as a Christian, Perkins developed an interest in social issues early in life. This led to a career fighting for the rights of hard-working men and women and their children at the local, state, and federal levels. Though she rarely discussed it publicly, her religion was the prime motivation for all she accomplished. It inspired her to continue with the hard work, long hours and frequent resistance. To fully understand who this extraordinary woman was we must recognize the importance of her faith, a subject often missing from historical accounts. Her beliefs helped Perkins establish programs that continue to aid Americans today.

Frances Perkins was born Fanny Coralie Perkins in Boston, Massachusetts, where her middle class family lived before moving to Worcester. Staunch Maine Congregationalists, they never missed church on Sunday. This offered their daughter a strong moral foundation and belief in Christian values. Frances' mother Susan was very involved in church activities and offered friendship and aid to their poor neighbors, encouraging her daughter to do so as well. Frances was always moved to sympathy by their suffering. Her parents, however, saw poverty as more of a moral failing brought on by factors like laziness or alcoholism. Their daughter strongly disagreed. As she got older, she learned that poverty was not always the fault of the sufferers, but could be caused by systemic circumstances beyond their control, such as illness, injury, and low wages.

Perkins continued her interest in helping others when she went away to college at Mount Holyoke. Mary Lyon, who founded the school, was a practicing Christian who intended to train young women as teachers and missionaries. Attending church services was mandatory; like Perkins, most of the students were Protestants. Although majoring in chemistry and physics, the class that really caught her interest concerned American economic history. The professor took her students to visit the factories lining Massachusetts rivers, where they could see for themselves where the working classes labored. They learned of the dangerous cramped spaces, heavy workloads, long hours and low pay. They interviewed workers and collected statistics. [3] At Mount Holyoke Perkins also met Florence Kelley, who would become her most important mentor. The head of the National Consumers League, formed to improve conditions for workers, Kelley gave a speech about ending child labor and sweatshop labor which Perkins never forgot. Kelley was in the forefront of reform efforts and became a friend and inspiration to the young Perkins.

Perkins graduated from college in 1902 as the president of her class. In her final speech she included a quote from the Bible (1 Corinthians 15:58): "Therefore my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." [4] Inspired by the young orator, her class selected as their motto, "Be ye steadfast."

After graduation Perkins was determined to go into social work, moving to New York City to ask for a job with the New York Charity Organization Society. When rebuffed, she insisted on speaking to the director, Edward T. Devine, who asked her a few questions and realized she was far too young and naïve yet to work in the field. He gave her books to read and suggested she work as a teacher for a while and gain some worldly experience. Unabashed, Perkins went out and did just that. She taught briefly at a couple of academies in New England, then took a job at private school Ferry Hall in Lake Forest, Illinois for three years.

During her time at Ferry Hall, Perkins made the decision to become a member of the Episcopal Church, the American descendant of the Church of England. According to scholar Donn Mitchell, Perkins, like many other American Episcopalians of this era, was "steeped in the socialist thought of British Anglo-Catholicism." [5] In addition to teaching, she spent her free time volunteering at Chicago's famous Hull House, the settlement house founded by Jane Addams, well known advocate for impoverished immigrants and the working poor. Of her work there Perkins said:

> *I had to do something about unnecessary hazards to life, unnecessary poverty. It was sort of up to me…One thing seemed perfectly clear. Our Lord had directed all who were following in his path to visit the widows, the orphans, the fatherless, the prisoners and so forth. Definitely the circumstances of the life of the people of my generation was my business, and I ought to do something about it.* [6]

Although many associate Hull House with Protestant voluntarism, it was modeled after Toynbee Hall, a mission run by the Church of England that Addams had visited while in Great Britain, and "embodied the state church tradition to which the Episcopal Church was heir." [7] This was likely an important factor in her conversion.

Perkins joined a brand new Episcopal congregation called The Church of the Holy Spirit. The church building was consecrated in June of 1905, and at this ceremony Perkins (who had changed her name officially to Frances C. Perkins from her birth name Fanny Coralie) was confirmed as a new member. In addition to their philanthropic motive, she was drawn to the sense of ritual, ceremony, and discipline she saw in the Episcopal Church. They gave her comfort and stability, something she felt there lacking in American life, including political life. Always honoring important family occasions herself, Perkins liked how the

high-church ceremonies recognized life's milestones in its services and observed the changing seasons of the church calendar. [8]

After her time at Ferry Hall, Perkins took a position as secretary of the Philadelphia Research and Protective Organization, an interfaith organization founded by the Episcopal Diocese. This group was formed to aid poor young immigrant and minority women who, when looking for work, were often exploited and driven into prostitution. Investigating supposedly legitimate opportunities, the young social worker applied to see which ones falsely promised legal employment. From this point on, "Perkins was on the trajectory that would guide the rest of her life—working for social justice in close association with the Episcopal Church." [9]

Although the work was rewarding, it paid very little, and Perkins had trouble making ends meet. She also began to see that the social problems involved were extremely complex. She realized she needed to learn more about the issues facing the poor so she could fight for them more effectively. Deciding to return to school, she first enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School of Finance and Commerce, which led to a fellowship with Columbia University and a master's degree in Sociology and Economics.

After her graduation in 1910, the National Consumers League offered Perkins a job heading their office in New York City. There she helped secure passage of a law mandating a fifty-four hour work week and became determined to end child labor. She came to believe that unions were an important part of improving the lives of workers. Through her work she met and worked with many important labor leaders from different ethnic and religious groups, including German, Irish, Italian, Jewish, and Catholic. They collaborated to meet their common goals.

Her belief in unions became even stronger after Perkins witnessed the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Fire, which occurred in a factory where young women made blouses. Factories like this had always been a terrible fire hazard—full of bins overflowing with flammable cotton, inadequate exits and fire escapes, and overcrowding of workers and machines. [10] Visiting friends nearby, Perkins heard the commotion and rushed into the street to see what was happening. What she saw was horrifying. One hundred and forty six people died in the fire, almost all of them young immigrant women, many of whom jumped to their deaths from the upper floors trying to escape the flames and smoke. The event exploded in the national consciousness and rekindled debates over capitalism and its priorities of profit over the health and safety of workers. Perkins later wrote of the incident that the fire had, "struck at the pit of my stomach. I felt I must sear it not only on my mind but on my heart as a never-to-be-forgotten reminder of why I had to spend my life fighting conditions that could permit such a tragedy." [11]

Determined to help make something positive come out of the tragic event, Perkins worked with a committee formed to investigate the tragedy, the

New York State Factory Investigating Commission. She personally took members of the Commission on personal tours of the factories. They were urged to use some of the so-called "fire escapes"—steep iron ladders on the sides of buildings that were only accessible by crawling through a small hole in the wall, covered with ice in winter, and often ending twelve feet from the ground. [12]

Named Executive Director of the Committee on Safety, which focused on eliminating workplace dangers, Perkins was hired at the suggestion of former President Theodore Roosevelt, whom she knew through the Consumers League and their mutual connections with Jane Addams and Florence Kelley. [13] Making speeches about the need for better working conditions, she helped pass laws that required factory owners to have regular fire drills, adequate fire escapes, and that banned smoking in factories, as well as working to protect women and children in the workplace from abuses and wage discrimination.

Around the same time as the Shirtwaist fire, another very important event occurred in Perkins' life—she met her future husband, Paul Wilson. Although later claiming not to have recalled exactly how they became acquainted, it was likely through mutual friends since they traveled in the same social circles. Both were in their thirties. Wilson was a financial statistician who worked with a social reform group exposing wasteful government spending. Over a three year courtship, they exchanged many affectionate letters. Certainly Frances wanted romantic love, marriage, and children but was torn about their potentially negative implications on her independence and burgeoning career. [14]

In spite of these doubts, she and Paul considered themselves a modern couple who could balance their work and married life. They married in 1913, just as Wilson was taking a job in the administration of the newly elected mayor of New York, John Purroy Mitchel. Although in private life and on her passport she took her husband's name, in public life she continued to be known as Frances Perkins--becoming well known for her work, it seemed prudent to keep the name under which she was most recognized.

The Wilson's marriage was not perfect. After Perkins stopped work at the Safety Committee she found the duties of a full time politician's wife exhausting and not nearly as satisfying as her former vocation. There was a sense of lost self esteem and at one point the couple considered a separation. However, the birth of their daughter Susanna in 1916 brought much happiness to them after the tragedies of a miscarriage and a stillbirth. Perkins became active in volunteer and committee work while Susanna was young.

Sadly, not long after Susanna was born, Paul Wilson began to show signs of emotional illness. He drank heavily and gambled, then would have bouts of depression. According to Perkins, "It was always up and down. He was sometimes depressed, sometimes excited."[15] His symptoms show what we today would call manic depression or bi-polar disease. The episodes became so severe he often had to be institutionalized. However, there were

periods when he could live at home with his family. Susanna also had a somewhat rocky relationship with her mother and at times showed symptoms of mental instability as well.

Perkins had little family help in dealing with these problems. Paul's parents were dead, as was her own father, and she was not close to her mother. Due to her husband's financial irresponsibility, she also had to become the principal breadwinner of the family. [16] Bolstered as always by her religion and her faith in God, Perkins went back to work and held her family together.

It was while working with the Consumers League that Perkins met a New York assemblyman named Al Smith, who chaired the Factory Investigating Commission. She and Smith got to know each other well. He had advised her in her efforts to pass the fifty-four hour a week work law. Though he was Catholic, Smith and Perkins found that they both wanted to improve conditions for the poor and working class.

When Smith became Governor of New York in 1918, he asked her to be a member of the State Industrial Commission. Wondering if she could be more useful working outside the government to effect change, she expressed her concerns to mentor Florence Kelley: "I could be brave…I have no political commitments. I didn't have to protect anybody. I could speak out openly…I was serving the law and my God." [17] But Kelley wept with joy at the news and told her not to worry; that it would be good to have someone in that position that knew about industrial conditions and cared about workers, particularly women. Perkins took the job, keeping in mind treasured advice from her grandmother: "If somebody opens a door for you, unexpectedly, without connivance on your part, walk right in and do the best you can. It's the Lord's will for you." [18]

Perkins enjoyed the work on the commission and her admiration for Al Smith grew, because he acted from moral purpose and not just economic advantage. One of their important accomplishments that illustrated this philosophy was the workman's compensation law for injured workers.

Workman's compensation was a social insurance program, which Perkins found appealing. She once called social insurance "the most brilliant achievement of the mind of man." [19] This was because the program appealed to both of her main interests, science and religion. It was scientific because of the statistical data involved to implement it, and religious because of "the acknowledgement that each man, when the community shares the cost of one's disaster, is his brother's keeper." [20] She went on to actively support Smith's 1928 bid for the Presidency. One reason, as she said in her stump speech on his behalf, was that he believed in God and His guidance and he believed that it was his duty to follow God's laws. She would close her remarks by saying, "He says his prayers. I would rather have a man in the White House who says his prayers than one who doesn't pay any attention to religion." [21]

Although Smith lost his campaign for President, the New York governor's office remained in Democratic hands when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected to the post. Perkins accepted Roosevelt's offer to take over leadership of the Industrial Commission. In some ways, she got along even better with FDR than she had with Smith—both were Episcopalians,

well-educated, with deep experience in NY politics, and viewed past events from similar viewpoints.[22] This shared background, "eased communication. If she talked…about social justice or urged him to do something simply because it was right, the words tended to have the same resonance to both minds." [23] Of FDR's religious beliefs, she wrote, "His Christian faith was absolutely simple…he had no doubts." [24] She believed that his essential humanity and kindness towards others was acquired from his religious life.

When Roosevelt was elected President, their affinity and friendship made it likely that he would want Perkins to come and work with him in Washington. Her friends, such as the Women's Democratic National Campaign Committee director Mary Dewson, often dropped Perkins' name to newspaper reporters. These supporters encouraged her to take the position of Labor Secretary if it was offered. Perkins was aware of what

a great privilege and honor the position would be, especially for a woman, but she was torn over the decision. She liked living in New York City with her family. Adding to her distress, Paul was frequently ill and her daughter was still in school. She felt they needed her to stay with them. Mary Dewson reminded her that Florence Kelley (who had passed away not long before) would have been disappointed if she turned it down.

Perkins finally decided to consult an Episcopal Bishop, Charles K. Gilbert of New York, to ask what she should do. He wrote her that the country was in crisis due to the Depression and that God was calling her to use her unique talents to help. According to Gilbert, her positive influence would be important within the President's administration: "I know that your persuasiveness and your discerning judgment and your insistence on the higher human values would make itself felt…I really believe that it is God's own call… what man thinks is of no consequence." [25] After reading his letter, she decided to accept the appointment if it was offered. She promised her husband she would continue her routine of visiting him and their daughter every weekend.

Perkins had definite plans for her agenda as Labor Secretary. In her first meeting with FDR to discuss the appointment in February of 1933, she laid out several ambitious programs. She wanted first to implement federal unemployment relief for the many Americans out of work, and to start a public works program. In conjunction with this she suggested a forty hour work week and a minimum wage that workers could live on. She advocated ending child labor because it would keep children in school and leave more jobs for adults. Federal expansion of the workers' compensation program passed in New York was an important component of her plan as well. Roosevelt wondered if these programs would be constitutional. Perkins suggested that if companies had government contracts, then the government had the right to set standards for the conditions under which the goods it purchased were manufactured. This would encourage private industry to keep to these same standards in order to stay competitive for

these contracts. [26]

Perkins' top priority was to develop a government old age pension, primarily because the Depression had made it harder for older people to get work. In addition, many families could no longer take care of elderly relatives because of their own financial stresses. In this she surely was inspired by the Bible's admonition to care for widows and orphans (because children who had lost their parents were also covered under the plan). [27] FDR was resistant at first; he did not want to have a system like "the dole" as England did, which was straight government relief. She explained to him that it would be a social insurance program like unemployment, where workers paid into it themselves. They would collect the benefits when they retired.

After laying out her ideas, Perkins warned the President, "Are you sure you want this done, because you don't want me for Secretary of Labor if you don't want these things done." [28] Fortunately, FDR said he was willing to support her. As the meeting broke up, he joked that she would be perpetually nagging him about these programs. Perkins said later that she took that statement as a sign, "He wanted his conscience kept for him by somebody." [29]

The programs Perkins advocated—including health insurance, which did not make it into the final version of Social Security—followed Jesus' teachings about taking care of the poor, children, widows, and others in need. In fact, they followed closely the traditional Catholic Corporal Works of Mercy, which include: providing nourishment to the hungry and thirsty; clothing the naked; visiting the sick; and burying the dead. In ancient societies, aid would be given directly: e.g., one gave food to a hungry person. In the modern system, money is given to allow the person to acquire what they need. According to scholar Donn Mitchell, "the law combined the Catholic ideals of mercy with the long-standing Protestant emphasis on personal responsibility." [30]

On the night before Roosevelt's March 4th inauguration, Perkins got a phone call inviting her to a pre-inaugural prayer service the next morning at St. John's Church in Washington's Lafayette Square. Referring to the crisis the country faced in the Great Depression, she recalled, "If ever a man wanted to pray, it was that day…we [the attendees] were Catholics, Protestants, Jews, but I doubt that anyone remembered the difference." [31]

This statement was typical of her attitude. If a person was willing to work with others for a common cause, she did not discriminate on the basis of religion. She was once asked, "Instead of wishing to create a Christian society, why not say a decent society, recognizing the noble aspirations of the Hebrew prophets and those like Gandhi who belonged to quite alien faiths?" She replied that she agreed and that she wished for a society in which "people of all kinds of faiths who believed in God could cooperate." [32]

Perkins was impressed and deeply moved by Roosevelt's first inaugural

address. She had already seen an early draft of the speech, but changes had been made before it was delivered. Just that morning he had added the famous line,

"The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." [33] He referenced the Bible a few times, saying that the country's problems did not come from a plague of locusts and that the money changers (meaning bankers and businessmen) had fled from their high temple seats. Perkins felt that this speech was different from any others he gave. It seemed to have been motivated by something deep within. Other speeches he might jokingly brag about, but never the first inaugural address. According to Perkins: "He would never claim credit for that. It was something not of his own making. I'm sure he thought of it as direct divine guidance." [34]

Perkins herself sought divine guidance throughout her time as Labor Secretary. From the time she first came to Washington, she regularly attended mass at St. James Church, though it was farther away from her residence than other Episcopal churches. Rector Alfred Q. Plank offered an Anglo-Catholic "high-church" mass there, which had the color and ritual she preferred. She became friendly with Plank and asked him for help early on with the demands and stresses of her job. He suggested she might find peace visiting a convent of an Episcopal order of nuns called All Saints in Maryland, not far from Baltimore.

Her first trip to the convent took place in the spring of 1933. She liked the quiet and serenity she found there. Regular monthly visits soon commenced, usually for a day or two at a time, during which Perkins spent most of her time in quiet prayer.[35] Because of her frequent visits, she became an associate of the convent and wore a special white cap while there to symbolize this. The nuns focused on prayer, meditation and caring for handicapped children. They wore the traditional long black habit and wimple and lived very simply, growing their own food and attending services several times a day. [36] Perkins found the visits refreshing and rejuvenating: they helped her to cope with the demands of political life.

Perkins had a strong bond with FDR because of their shared beliefs. Both were Christians and humanitarians. When asked about his political philosophy, Roosevelt replied, "Philosophy? I am a Christian and a Democrat—that's all." [37] In her book *The Roosevelt I Knew*, Perkins said of him, "He saw the betterment of life and people as part of God's work, and he felt that man's devotion to God expressed itself by serving his fellow men." [38] She once observed FDR listening to someone talk about capitalism as an efficient system. The speaker said that when the capitalist system collapsed, it was best to let the economy hit rock bottom and wait until it rights itself, no matter the effects on society. This kind of philosophy horrified him. Perkins never forgot the look on FDR's face when he replied, "People aren't cattle, you know!" [39]

Religion was taken for granted as a part of FDR's life, as it was for Perkins. He attended church services and had a love for singing hymns and reading the Bible. So important was religion to him that he made certain it was included when his 1941 State of the Union speech listing the four freedoms was written. And, like Perkins, he felt no conflict in associating with those of any other faith. He believed strongly in the importance of religion in a person's life.

Faith in Christian principles was not only a source of strength. For Perkins, it was also an important factor in helping to stay motivated to do good works. When she was younger, she

had a discussion with friends from the settlement houses about getting new shoes for a homeless man. One friend said the reason to give him the shoes was simple: his feet were cold. Another friend, professing Christian motives, opined that it must be done for Jesus' sake. At the time she found the discussion pointless. She felt that the reason why a good deed was performed would not matter if the end result was the same. Later, however, during her meditative stays at the convent, she changed her opinion. The reasons were important because even the strongest urge to do good works could be a fleeting emotion. Sometimes recipients become ungrateful and helpers can get discouraged and give up. Doing

good for Jesus' sake, not simply one's own gratification, was a more powerful incentive. Years later a study of reformers from her own era proved her right. People who remained active for many years in movements that aided the disadvantaged were much more likely to have strong religious motivations. [40]

One of the lowest points of Perkins' career came in 1939. Republicans in Congress, who had been opposing most of her programs since she first joined the cabinet, brought a charge of impeachment against her. They claimed that she was secretly a Communist. As Secretary of Labor she was in charge of immigration. Harry Bridges, a native Australian who lived in California, had been a labor negotiator during a major San Francisco longshoreman strike that Perkins was monitoring. Business leaders and rival labor leaders had tried to get him deported as a Communist. Bridges had worked with Communists but denied being one himself. The Republican argued that Perkins did not push hard for his deportation, which angered them. This was an immensely stressful time for Perkins. She had the support of her close friends but no one in the administration, including FDR, spoke up publicly in her defense. [41]

Perkins leaned on her faith to make it through those difficult times. She resolved to "rely upon myself under the guidance of God to do the right thing and make the right decision and take the consequence," and attended mass daily throughout the impeachment crisis.[42] Participating in the highly structured rituals was calming and helped her to feel centered and at peace. On the advice of Alfred Plank, she prayed for her enemies—though because she could not bear to say their names, she prayed for them in general terms, such as those who bore false witness. [43] She continued to visit All Saints' as often as she could for spiritual support. In her desk, she kept inspirational notes she had written to herself, which must have been helpful during this crisis. One of them read:

> *Remember…we are only day laborers in the vineyard of the Lord—we are not the architect—the planner—God is that. We are to do our daily stint faithfully and then leave it to the architect God—Lay our course of bricks and not to question or worry about the total structure—that is God's business. Also Remember that Christ did his greatest work of redemption when*

he hung helpless on the CROSS. [44]

When the day came for the hearing, Labor Department solicitor Gerry Reilly walked with her. She asked him if he remembered the priest who walked beside Joan of Arc as she walked to the stake. Feeling as if she may be entering a den of lions, like Daniel from the Bible, she maintained, "I had a sense of a spiritual companion. As the Christians would say, 'My Lord walked beside me to the jaws of death.' I had a sense of the Lord Jesus looking after his people and walking beside them."[45] Perkins acquitted herself well under some harsh questioning. The House eventually voted that there was not enough evidence to impeach her, but it was still a painful experience. Her faith allowed her to remain strong and continue doing her job for the Americans in need.

Perkins once said to an interviewer, "I do realize that one ought to say in the interests of reality and thought that I was considerably religious minded…It was not so much my bringing up, but that I'd developed a personal religious outlook on life." [46] As important as her faith was in her life, it may seem surprising that Perkins rarely discussed her religion publicly. There were definite reasons, however. One of them was a wish not to offend or alienate people who did not share her beliefs. As far as discussing her policies in terms of Christian faith, her biographer maintained: "She seldom used such terms because she knew they made many people nervous." [47] This nervousness could have come from those who felt that a political figure should not mention religion lest it infringe upon the separation of church and state. It could also be that Perkins realized that the 1930s was a more secular age than the one she knew in her youth. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, workers for social justice, particularly women, were much more likely to proclaim spiritual motivations than the generation that came after them. In the pre-WWI era, workers in settlement houses tended to be those with strong religious beliefs as a basis for their vocation.

In the post-war era, when social work became professionalized, this was less likely to be the case. In fact, mentioning religion came to be considered an embarrassment, against the modern way of practicing. Helen Phelan, head of a settlement house in Cleveland, noted in 1930, "I am old-fashioned enough to have a religious motive for doing what I am doing. It is old-fashioned in these days, isn't it, to mention religion."[48]

Ironically, the main reason that Perkins rarely discussed her faith publicly stemmed from another of her religious beliefs. She felt that God gave everyone a unique personality. This gave them a right to keep their innermost selves private. She never liked to answer the personal questions the press loved to ask, and did not understand people who would tell all about themselves. In fact she was shocked by how much of their personal lives Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt would reveal to the press, once writing: "It embarrasses me to think that a human being, who has the rights of liberty, the basis of which is privacy, will so degrade himself as to expose his whole life and thinking, to throw away the privacy to which he's entitled and which God gave him." [49] She felt that "people who tell all and waste their integrity soon have none… an invasion or waste of privacy was a kind of disrespect for the Deity." [50]

Even when FBI director J. Edgar

Hoover suggested a plan to fingerprint aliens (which affected the Department of Labor due to its jurisdiction over immigration), and eventually every American citizen as well, Perkins opposed the idea because it violated the sanctity of a person's privacy. Hoover told her that the program would be useful; it would ease identification of the unidentified dead in accidents, for example. She answered him quite seriously, "Mr. Hoover, isn't it enough that his Maker would immediately recognize him?" [51] This response shows her determination to stand up for her religious beliefs no matter the situation.

In 1948, the former labor secretary participated in a presentation called the St. Bede Lectures at the St. Thomas Episcopal Church in New York, in which she gave three talks under the title "The Christian in the World." Here Perkins summed up her thoughts on religion and how it manifested itself in one's life. Man is a creature made by God with the power to love God and other men, she maintained, and that "because of God's love 'man has infinite worth'" and "the part of Christians in all this is to see that the state does care about what happens to the individual and doesn't say, 'Oh well, it can't be helped.'" [52] This idea is clearly manifested in the programs she implemented during her tenure as labor secretary. According to scholar Donn Mitchell, Perkins claimed there was never one guiding ideology in the New Deal, but that she and her colleagues, "were just decent people trying to do the right thing and pretty much making it up as they went along."[53] That statement was more a mark of her humility than anything. In fact Christianity guided the path. In her biography of Roosevelt, Perkins states that he too believed in an ethical political philosophy, which meant "that poverty is preventable, that poverty is destructive, wasteful, demoralizing, and that poverty in the midst of potential plenty is morally unacceptable in a Christian and democratic society." [54] In her lecture she pointed out that she did not mean that leaders "take the law into their own hands, only that they be aware of God's laws and eager to apply them" and that a Christian society should have "'a pattern of social cooperation and social justice' expressed in legal, economic and social relationships." [55] These lectures helped demonstrate that Perkins truly was "the most overtly religious and theologically articulate member of the New Deal team." [56]

After FDR's death in 1945, Truman accepted her resignation as Labor Secretary, but Perkins continued working, writing a biography of FDR, *The Roosevelt I Knew*, which was a great success. She maintained her career in Washington through an appointment to the U.S. Civil Services Commission. Because this job was less demanding, her husband was able, for the first time in years, to live with her, with hired attendants to assist in his care. Sadly, in October 1952 Paul Wilson had a stroke, fell extremely ill, and in December passed away from a second stroke. Although he had been unwell for most of his life, his death was a sad passing for his wife. As always, religion was a great comfort. She wrote to a friend after her loss:

> *Thank you so much for your kind and sympathetic words about Paul's death. These things are truly past man's understanding, but it is and always has been a comfort to me to know that in the midst of all the troubles he has had, he had remained a true believer. He died in the faith of the Church, received the Last Sacraments and*

was buried with all the warmth and hope with which the church surrounds us at the time of our greatest transition…[57]

In 1953 Perkins left her post at the Civil Services, but could not imagine retiring. Instead she lectured and taught seminars at colleges all over the country. In 1955, Cornell University offered her a position as a visiting professor in their School of Industrial and Labor Relations. She spoke about her time at the settlement houses, the American labor movement, and her work in the Roosevelt administration. So popular was she with the students, that in 1960 she became the first woman ever invited to live as a guest in residence at Telluride House, an academic organization. She spent several happy years there and became close friends with many of the young students.

On May 14th, 1965, at the age of 85, Perkins died of a stroke. [58] At her memorial service at Cornell, professor Maurice Neufeld spoke about "her extraordinary gift for friendship, her sense of formality and her religious spirit." From this spirit, he said, "emerged her sense of duty and inner discipline…which formed the central core of her character." [59]

The Episcopal Church so highly regards Frances Perkins for her good works, including creating Social Security, the minimum wage, and unemployment insurance, that it declared her a holy woman, or Episcopal saint. The church has a list of people to be potentially honored which is reviewed by their General Convention. Perkins' name was added as a "public servant and prophetic witness" in the fall of 2009. [60] Her feast day is May 13 and it was first celebrated in 2010. The Reverend Charles Hoffacker recently spoke about the Episcopal faith and Perkins' work:

> …we recognize a Creator who *continues to create, who supplies and sustains abundance, abundant nature and grace and glory. This basic and essential theology has societal ramifications. It produces a politics of generosity, not a politics of righteousness. Instead of enforcing social discipline, it emphasizes social provision. This is the authentic message of the Scriptures and the Christian tradition. This is what Frances Perkins embraced as an Episcopalian and an Anglo-Catholic. Through her efforts as public servant and prophetic witness, this foundational theology and its politics of generosity came to have a tremendous influence for good on millions and millions of lives and continues to do so.* [61]

Millions of Americans have benefited from the good influence of Frances Perkins on their lives. However, despite her vitally important role in shaping social policy, few Americans today remember her name or know of her

role in creating the programs that sustain so many. In her later years, she remained in the shadow of FDR. An incident at Cornell showed Perkins how ingrained her programs had become in American life. During a class, a student admonished her, "But in the United States we have always had Social Security." [62] He obviously had no idea when or with whom it had originated. This young man was probably not even born when Perkins was setting up the program, already so taken for granted by the 1950s that people could not imagine life without it.

Perkins herself was happy that Social Security was so safely ensconced in American politics. At a celebration for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the program in 1962, she said, "One thing I know: Social Security is so firmly embedded in the American psychology that no politician, no political party…could possibly destroy this Act…It is safe. It is safe forever, and for the lasting benefit of the people of the United States." [63] The programs she initiated were to be for the benefit of all. In 1941 during a speech called "What is Worth Working for in America," she said of her ideals, "It is an American version of the Golden Rule, of the second great Commandment to love thy neighbor… What kind of America we pass on, rests with us, under God." [64] Honoring the memory of Frances Perkins rests with us today—so that her legacy and the programs she initiated remain in place for future generations, keeping our country a fair and prosperous one for all of its citizens.

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FRANCES PERKINS CENTER

The mission of the Frances Perkins Center is to fulfill the legacy of Frances Perkins, principal architect of the New Deal, by continuing her work for social and economic justice and preserving for future generations her nationally significant family homestead.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all I would like to thank Rachel Post of the Frances Perkins Center for her assistance to me as I researched and wrote this project. I was so pleased to have this opportunity to work for the Center. I also greatly appreciated the editing help of Kate McCormick and Chris Breiseth, which proved to be invaluable. Thanks to James Tillman for doing the design and layout of this booklet—it turned out beautifully. I am especially grateful to my advisor and professor Ardis Cameron, who has been so supportive and encouraging to me while working towards my master's degree in ANES and first suggested I take on a research project. To all my wonderful family and friends who have been such a source of help and strength during these last few years: I could never have accomplished all I have without your love and constant support. Finally, a special thank you to my daughter Pandora, who continues to be my greatest inspiration and the light of my life.

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