

Charles Coughlin: American Catholic

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Charles Coughlin was a Roman Catholic priest and popular radio broadcaster in 1930s America. His populist message contained a heady mix of the Christian and the anti-Communist, sprinkled with personal attacks on politicians and captains of industry, and interlaced with latent and open anti-Semitism. He railed against powerful elites and gave voice to the fears and frustrations of the forgotten men and women of Depression-era America. His popularity and perceived power peaked when he allied with other American populists in 1936 to run a third-party presidential candidate against Franklin Delano Roosevelt, which failed spectacularly. Father Coughlin never provoked a neutral response from listeners or critics. To some, he provided a reassuring voice in the wilderness years of Depression-era America, relentlessly criticizing capitalist excess and championing the common man. To others, he was a peddler of fringe fiscal and political theories, a vituperative and specious man. Born in Canada, Coughlin reflected the anxieties of his adopted country and its Depression-era culture. He advocated anti-socialist and isolationist positions; and his populist position aligned with the uniquely American “fear of concentration of power, the traditional American resistance to being governed – whether by private interests or by public institutions.”¹ Above all else, Charles Coughlin was a Catholic. He framed his actions in the language of good versus evil, *Christ or Chaos*,² and sourced his authority to speak from Catholic papal teachings on social justice. Coughlin courted controversy, and critics rightly

¹ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, & the Great Depression* (New York: Vintage, 1983),

² Rev. Chas. E. Coughlin, *Father Coughlin's Radio Sermons October 1930-April, 1931 Complete* (Knox and O'Leary, 1931), 129.

attacked him for his demagoguery, anti-Semitism and fascist sympathies.³ This perspective of Coughlin as a promulgator of hate speech is important and relevant, but it does not explain his popularity. At his show's peak, Coughlin had 30 million listeners and received thousands of letters daily. His broadcasting career lasted fourteen years, from 1926 to 1940; and he was openly anti-Semitic only during the last two years, when his political influence had waned significantly. I argue that Coughlin is important in his own right, and that focusing exclusively on his anti-Semitism ignores and undervalues his legacy during the Great Depression. He helped bring into the mainstream an inclusive message of social justice that strongly influenced contemporary politics, and he did so in a uniquely Catholic, American and populist fashion.

Charles Edward Coughlin was born in Hamilton, Ontario in 1891 to devoutly Catholic, third-generation Irish parents. Coughlin grew up literally in the shadow of the Catholic Church in a childhood home "bracketed by a cathedral on one side and by a convent school complex on the other."⁴ He attended a boys-only Catholic grammar school and acted as an altar boy. Coughlin's immersion in his tight-knit Catholic and immigrant Irish community, with the attendant religious indoctrination and cultural expectation, marked him from an early age for an ecclesiastical career. For secondary education, he attended St. Michael's College School in Toronto, a Catholic preparatory school administered by the Basilian order. Four years later, he seamlessly entered St. Michael's College as a matriculating undergraduate student. In 1910, St. Michael's became a federated college of the University of Toronto and Coughlin graduated in 1911 with a B.A. in Philosophy. St. Michael's is a college with historically strong ties to the Canadian Irish immigrant and Catholic

³ Wallace Stegner, "The Radio Priest and His Flock," in *The Aspirin Age: 1919-1941: The Essential Events of American Life in the Chaotic Years between the Two World Wars* (Mattituck, N.Y.: Amereon Ltd, 2010); Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, The Father of Hate Radio* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

⁴ Ruth Mugglebee, *Father Coughlin of the Shrine of the Little Flower: An Account of the Life, Work and Message of Reverend Charles E. Coughlin*, (L.C. Page & Co, 1933); Peter A. Soderbergh, "The Rise of Father Coughlin, 1891-1930," *Social Science* 42, no. 1 (January 1967): 10-20.

community. The college is also associated with Marshall McLuhan, the media theorist, who served as a professor of English literature from 1946 until his death. Father Coughlin, however, is not listed as a notable alumnus.⁵

After graduation, Coughlin attended St. Basil's seminary for four years and took his priestly vows in 1916. As both a seminarian and an undergraduate, Coughlin studied the teachings of Pope Leo XIII, in particular his papal encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, *On the Condition of Labor*.⁶ (An encyclical is a letter from the head of the Catholic Church to his bishops on matters of contemporary doctrinal importance and reflects the Church's concerns on matters of social and economic inequality or morality.) Coughlin became well-versed in the ideas of *Rerum Novarum*, which became his foundational text in later years and especially during his early forays into political and social commentary. *Rerum Novarum* translates to *Of New Things* or *Of Revolutionary Change*, and refers to the first words of the papal encyclical of 1891. It is a ground-breaking work, laying the doctrinal foundations for Catholic social justice movements through the twentieth century. The Church published this encyclical at a time of social strife in Europe, when the impact of urbanization and industrialization began to disturb the social and political order. *Rerum* was the Church's attempt to counter the growth of socialism as a valid response to the distressed conditions of the working class, but is a deliberately vague document and open to interpretation. Strongly worded statements with little prescriptive detail litter the text: "some remedy must be found ...for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor" and "Working Men (sic) have been given over, isolated and defenseless, to the

⁵ "University of St. Michael's College, in the University of Toronto," accessed November 3, 2014, <http://stmikes.utoronto.ca/>.

⁶ Louis B. Ward, *Father Charles Coughlin: An Authorized Biography* (Detroit, MI: Tower Publications, 1933), 11; Robert S. Gallagher, "The Radio Priest," *American Heritage* 23, no. 6 (October 1972).

callousness of employers and the greed of unconstrained competition.”⁷ It projects a strongly anti-socialist message, rejecting completely the idea of State ownership of private property or interference in the affairs of the family. *Rerum* claims that socialists “are... emphatically unjust, for they would rob the lawful possessor [of property], distort the functions of the State, and create utter confusion in the community,” and that “socialists...in setting aside the parent and setting up a State supervision, act against natural justice, and destroy the structure of the home.”

The underlying theological basis of *Rerum* comes from the Natural Law theories of Thomas Aquinas and the Catholic concept of subsidiarity, the idea that “no higher-level association, like the State, should undertake a task that a lower level one, like a union or the family, could do as well.”⁸ Though the language of the encyclical is direct, the overall tenor is somewhat cautious and conservative. The Church’s preferred solution to the ‘condition of labor’ is a middle approach, one that balances the rights of individuals to wealth and property while recognizing the temporal nature of such wealth and the role of the laborer in its generation. It asks that the laborer be given the opportunity to share in the wealth of the State, the Church’s “desire is that the poor...should rise above poverty and wretchedness, and should better their condition in life.”⁹ *Rerum Novarum* demonstrates a wariness of organized labor, preferring instead workmen’s associations of a moral and Christian character. It considered European labor unions to be “in the hands of invisible leaders.” Notably, the encyclical encourages the Catholic clergy to engage with the secular world and directs that “every minister of holy religion must throw into the conflict all the energy of his mind.” This call to arms for secular engagement by priests is

⁷ *Seven Great Encyclicals: Labor - Education - Marriage - Reconstructing the Social Order - Atheistic Communism - World Social Problems - World Peace* (Paulist Press, 1963).

⁸ Charles Morris, *American Catholic: The Saints and Sinners Who Built America’s Most Powerful Church* (New York: Vintage, 1998), 150.

⁹ *Seven Great Encyclicals*.

significant. Different groups of Catholics will interpret it in various ways, but it effectively granted papal permission – of critical importance to Catholics – for ministers to take part in the political problem-solving process. It also offered a practical message of hope to the average working-class Catholic. Instead of the standard Catholic guidance of offering up to God one's suffering in this world in return for eternal salvation in the next, this was an earth-bound doctrine that recognized human suffering as an injustice - one that the Church could help alleviate. This foundational document has continued to inform Church teachings and actions on social reform, and echoes of it can be found in a recent letter from Pope Francis to the leaders of the G20.¹⁰

There is no evidence that a young Charles Coughlin felt sufficiently 'energized' to enter into social 'conflict' immediately upon becoming a priest. He remained part of the Basilian Order, assuming a teaching role for the next seven years at Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario near Detroit, Michigan. In 1923, Coughlin left the Basilian order to assume clerical duties in the Catholic diocese of Detroit. His immediate superior was Bishop Michael Gallagher and, from 1923 to 1926, he performed personal secretarial duties for the bishop and was assistant pastor at various parishes.¹¹ The importance of Coughlin's relationship with Gallagher cannot be overstated; according to Coughlin, "all that I am is due to my Bishop."¹² Gallagher recognized Coughlin as a leader, an organizer and a highly effective communicator. In 1926, Gallagher directed Coughlin to found the new Catholic parish of Royal Oak in suburban Detroit. Coughlin co-signed the loan from the Archdiocese that was required to buy the land and build the new church.¹³ The ever-ambitious Coughlin built a 600-seat

¹⁰ Pope Francis, "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis to the Prime Minister of Australia on the Occasion of the G20 Summit" (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, November 6, 2014). "Throughout the world...there are far too many women and men suffering from severe malnutrition, a rise in the number of the unemployed, an extremely high percentage of young people without work and an increase in social exclusion".

¹¹ Gallagher, "Radio Priest."

¹² Ward, *Father Charles Coughlin*, 272.

¹³ Gallagher, "Radio Priest."

church for a parish of 28 families, half of whom were 'mixed' - meaning only one spouse was Catholic. At Gallagher's direction, the new church was to be named after the recently canonized St. Therese of Lisieux, or The Little Flower, a particular favorite of the new Pope Pius XI.¹⁴ Within two weeks of its opening, the local branch of the Ku Klux Klan planted a flaming cross outside the new Shrine of the Little Flower. In Coughlin lore, this is the time when he swore over the burning embers that someday he would build "a cross so high...that neither man nor beast can burn it down."¹⁵ Within ten years a granite Charity Crucifixion Tower, 110 feet in height, would be erected on the same site.

Father Coughlin had a loan to repay and limited resources in Royal Oak with which to do so. Demonstrating a promotional flair and an early ability to network with influential leaders, he persuaded the Detroit Tiger's baseball team, via his Catholic friend and baseball scout, Aloysius Egan, to visit Royal Oak as a fundraiser. They brought along baseball star Babe Ruth, who happened to be in town with the New York Yankees.¹⁶ Coughlin became friends with local businessman George 'Dick' Richards, the soon-to-be owner of the Detroit radio station, WJR, and its Catholic station manager Leo Fitzpatrick. He had been dabbling earlier in broadcasting with WJR and, with Richards' and Fitzpatrick's help, he hatched the plan to broadcast a weekly Sunday radio show. The program, which focused on issues of general Christian concern, was called the Golden Hour and started in October 1926. From the beginning, Coughlin maintained a physical and commercial distance from WJR. He called in his broadcast over a leased phone line from Royal Oak, some twelve miles distant. Later, listeners could join The Radio League of the Little Flower and receive a

¹⁴ University of Detroit Mercy, "An Historical Exploration of Father Charles E. Coughlin's Influence," *An Historical Exploration of Father Charles E. Coughlin's Influence*, accessed November 3, 2014, http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/coughlin/index.php. The detailed origin story of the naming of the Shrine and the significance of 'The Little Flower' to Pius XI is outlined by an 82 year old Coughlin in an undated radio broadcast.

¹⁵ Mugglebee, *Father Coughlin*, 164–66.

¹⁶ University of Detroit Mercy, "An Historical Exploration." Shrine origin story in undated broadcast.

printed pamphlet of the broadcast; a fee was not suggested but listeners routinely sent in what they could, mostly coins and dollar bills taped to their letters.¹⁷ Without Bishop Gallagher's *imprimatur*, Coughlin could not have broadcast his radio show and, from the beginning, Gallagher enthusiastically supported this enterprise.¹⁸

The intimacy of the radio-listening experience was particularly suited to Coughlin's rhetorical style, one that was "avuncular yet authoritative, relaxed yet assertive."¹⁹ Coughlin had much in common with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR) in this regard, and was considered one of the finest radio voices of his generation. His oratorical skills, honed in the seminary and the pulpit, combined with a lilting Irish brogue to deliver a message that spoke as much to the heart as to the mind.²⁰ Even though he was a fourth-generation Irish emigrant, Coughlin had a pronounced Irish accent. This cultural coding would simultaneously provide ready access to his fellow Irish-American Catholics and a dismissive cultural classification, that of an 'Irish Priest,' for his Protestant critics.²¹ The most-quoted description of Coughlin's radio voice comes from Wallace Stegner, who said it was "a voice of such mellow richness, such manly, heartwarming confidential intimacy, such emotional and ingratiating charm...without doubt one of the great speaking voices of the 20th century...it was a voice made for promises."²² Through radio, Coughlin's charismatic and persuasive rhetoric moved out of the physical and local church into a virtual mega-church, with a congregation that numbered in the millions.

¹⁷ JoEllen McNergney Vinyard, *Right in Michigan's Grassroots: From the KKK to the Michigan Militia* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press/Regional, 2011), 102–5.

¹⁸ Ward, *Father Charles Coughlin*, vii–x, 272. Bishop Gallagher wrote the introduction to Ward's book.

¹⁹ Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 115.

²⁰ Ward, *Father Charles Coughlin*, 37–38. "Plain facts for plain people, couched in plain logic, became the adopted formula which he never deserted". This runs somewhat counter to the purple prose regularly employed by Coughlin, an example from the December 1930 sermon *Christ or Chaos* "no one cares to cast a pall of pessimism over the eyes of his fellow citizens as we anxiously await the first vagrant rays of the new year's dawnlight."

²¹ *Ibid.*, 334.

²² Stegner, "The Radio Priest and His Flock," 234.

Father Coughlin's broadcasting career progressed over four main phases. During 1926-1929, his work held a broad Christian appeal focusing on familiar themes of prayer, family and the Ten Commandments. In keeping with the tenets of *Rerum Novarum*, he categorically denounced socialism, atheism and communism. The years 1929-1932 were key for Coughlin, marking his emergence onto the national stage. Energized by the social and economic breakdown resulting from the 1929 stock market collapse, he deployed a new form of populist rhetoric – one infused with Catholic social teaching, against business elites and in support of FDR's presidential candidacy. The two later periods in his broadcasting career covered the years between 1933-1936 and 1937-1940. The first of these latter periods can be called the time of political overreach and failed national ambition, marking Coughlin's break with both the Roosevelt administration and the Catholic leadership of America. The last few years of Coughlin's media career include his bitter and public anti-Semitic period, when he became increasingly alienated and marginalized from the political, religious and media mainstream. It is these last years of intolerance that have largely cemented his reputation as the "father of hate radio."²³

After the stock market crash of October 1929, Coughlin witnessed the heavy toll the subsequent economic depression took on his local community in suburban Detroit. As an automotive and industrial hub, Michigan and its cities were subject to the economic ripple effects of an unprecedented slowdown in car production. The city of Detroit found itself in dire economic straits. Business and political leaders during this time struggled to keep pace with the economic carnage unfolding around them. Ford's comments in 1931 that the Depression "was a wholesome thing in general"²⁴ were out of touch with working-class reality; by 1932, the city of 1.6 million had a welfare roll of 192,000.²⁵ In 1930,

²³ Warren, *Radio Priest*.

²⁴ Vinyard, *Right in Michigan*, 107.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 109.

gangsters shot and killed a local Detroit radio broadcaster, Jerry Buckley. The public presumed that criminals murdered Buckley for his outspoken criticism of organized crime and its political links. The city government recalled the mayor (Charles Bowles) on the night of the shooting and replaced him with Frank Murphy, an Irish Catholic jurist and friend of Father Coughlin.²⁶ Frank Murphy became a leading political figure in the Democratic Party establishment and would later serve as the U.S. governor of The Philippines, the governor of Michigan, and the U.S. Attorney General, ending his public career as a Supreme Court justice.

In response to the unfolding economic depression, Coughlin's generically Christian radio sermons became increasingly political and personal. Father Coughlin's sonorous words would, on occasion, build to an intemperate crescendo of vitriol as he personalized his attacks on powerful individuals, including local Detroit business leaders such as Henry Ford. He promised that those "who would make their millions by the sweat of the brow of the poor workingman can look forward to a day when they shall grace some gutter with their carcass...a day when the workingman shall rise up in his wrath and break down this growing system of plutocracy."²⁷ Consciously or unconsciously, he acted in the American populist tradition by simultaneously railing against the business/government elite and denouncing socialist ideals of economic equality. He readily commingled the traditional and anti-elitist American "fear of concentrated power"²⁸ with a cultural conservatism that was fervently anti-socialist and America-first isolationist. This populist and non-ideological approach defied ready political categorization; it was neither left nor right but a catch-all hybrid designed to both reflect and magnify indignation and disillusionment across the political spectrum. Significantly, Coughlin infused his

²⁶ Ibid., 111.

²⁷ University of Detroit Mercy, "An Historical Exploration." Radio sermon of December 15th, 1929.

²⁸ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 283.

populist rhetoric with the Catholic and egalitarian ideas of *Rerum Novarum* and what would soon be known as 'social justice.'

In a January 1930 sermon about the Christian family, Coughlin harshly criticized the increasing number of divorces in America. This sermon generated a number of letters in support of divorce, which Coughlin associated with "the purple poison of Bolshevism and its doctrines."²⁹ His next sermon, *Christ or the Red Fog*, systematically laid out the case against communism and marked Coughlin's formal entry into explicit political commentary. Coughlin's views in this sermon are consistent with the message of *Rerum Novarum* and Catholic absolute opposition to communist ideology. Coughlin stated that "between it [Bolshevism] and the Catholic Church there is a war unto death," and that "International Socialism not only strives to break down the permanency of the American family, its aim is at the nation itself."³⁰ As a solution, he proposed that "we can start with the leaders of industrialism. We can ask them to better the working conditions of their laborers, to devise ways and means to keep the laborer steadily employed."³¹ Coughlin's continued, often illogical inveigling against the concentration of wealth and the false ideology of communism is typified in his congressional testimony to the Hamilton-Fish hearings on domestic subversion in 1930 when he accused Henry Ford of being a 'communizer.' Coughlin's strained logic claimed that Ford was pushing his workers into the arms of communists by his unfair labor practices.³² Whether his arguments were strictly rational or not mattered little to Coughlin's loyal listeners. He offered a comforting voice of leadership and authority to his ever-expanding audience (his radio show was picked up by CBS in 1930) and from the perspective of his supporters, he spoke the truth about those in power in a fearless and uncompromising fashion. His sermons, while still religious, continued to

²⁹ Ward, *Father Charles Coughlin*, 55–72.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 102.

interweave social and political commentary. He called for unspecified “concrete action” because “the silly psychology...that we are getting better and better every day can never alleviate the starving, naked laborer's children who cannot wait until the springtime of promise arrives.”³³ He still strove for the middle ground, rejecting efforts to link him with class warfare and asserting that “anyone who attempts to build up animosity between the classes is neither American nor Christian.”³⁴ Coughlin continued to popularize *Rerum Novarum* and Catholic social doctrine outside of the cloistered confines of the seminary. He engaged energetically in the conflict of his time because “Leo XIII practically commanded that we, the priests of this church, become interested in this vital subject which deals with the relations between man and man, employer and employee.”³⁵

Coughlin's embrace of *Rerum Novarum* received a significant seal of approval when Pope Pius XI released the encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno, On Reconstructing the Social Order* in 1931. *Quadragesimo Anno*, translated as *Forty Years Later*, was issued upon the 40th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*. It sought to reaffirm the core message of Pope Leo XIII, that the Church offered a middle way between the excesses of capitalism and the extremes of communism. It introduced the concept of the “principles of social justice” where “one class is forbidden to exclude the other from a share in the profits.”³⁶ It further affirms that “each class...must receive its due share, and the distribution of created goods must be brought into conformity with the demands of common good and social justice, for every sincere observer is conscious that the vast difference between the few who hold excessive wealth and the many who live in destitution constitute a grave evil in modern society.” The encyclical was fervently anti-socialist, like the earlier *Rerum*, stating categorically that

³³ Coughlin, *Radio Sermons, 1930-31*, 58.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁶ *Seven Great Encyclicals*.

“Catholic and socialist are contradictory terms.” It also restated the desire to structure workingmen’s organizations along occupational lines, with a focus on Christian moral virtue. The title, *Reconstructing the Social Order*, reflected the Church’s concern that individuals were becoming increasingly dislocated from their society. It worried that the State and corporations were “arrogating to themselves functions which can be performed efficiently by smaller and lower bodies.” This reaffirmation of the principle of subsidiarity and natural law emphasized that “the true aim of all social activity should be to help individuals of the social body, but never to destroy or absorb them.” With both these encyclicals, the Church succeeded in astutely co-opting socialist ideas on inequality and the condition of labor, reproducing them as their own.

Father Coughlin now had two papal encyclicals with which to justify his crusades against ultra-capitalism and communism. Of particular importance, in the period from 1930 through 1932, he succeeded in popularizing their concepts with both the public and with politicians. Just as Coughlin became known as the “Radio Priest,” his friend – the influential Frank Murphy - became the “Reform Mayor.” Both preached the message of Leo XIII and Pius XI.³⁷ This social justice doctrine was timely and well received by both American Catholics and Protestants. It projected a positive message of social activism, one that rejected *laissez-faire* capitalist assumptions and emphasized Christian concepts of charity and American ideals of fair play and community. By 1932, Coughlin and Murphy strongly supported Franklin Delano Roosevelt. FDR recognized the political potential of the social justice message, especially with working- class Catholic voters. At a campaign event in Detroit in October 1932, Roosevelt referred several times to the encyclicals. At the same event, Coughlin delivered the

³⁷ Vinyard, *Right in Michigan*, 118.

invocation.³⁸ The following month, FDR became the first-ever Democratic candidate to win the state of Michigan.

Other Catholic 'leaders' recognized the power of the papal encyclicals. Monsignor John Ryan of the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC), the main Catholic lobby group in Washington D.C., became an early advocate. Ryan was a powerful intellectual force within the Catholic community and Dean of the Catholic University of America. He believed in effecting change from within the existing State and government structure and went on to be a strong supporter of the New Deal, even serving in a formal role in the National Recovery Administration.³⁹ Ryan was a strong supporter of Coughlin during the early years of the Great Depression because Coughlin was spreading the social justice message to the mass culture in a way that was not possible within the traditional confines of the Catholic state within a state.⁴⁰ Another leading Catholic organization inspired by the encyclicals was the Catholic Worker Movement, founded by Dorothy Day in 1933. Day and her mentor, Peter Maurin, took a personalist approach to the social justice message. They did not preach to the existing power structure, either clerical or secular. Instead they opted to live the message, to dedicate themselves to the "service of the poor and the worker."⁴¹ They opened houses of hospitality to feed and shelter the homeless. They allied with striking workers, and competed with the communist *Daily Worker* publication with their own *Catholic Worker*.⁴² Catholic publications such as *America* and *Commonweal* also became strong proponents of the papal message, demonstrating a newly awakened and politicized Catholic engagement with the secular world.⁴³ If Ryan represented the progressive clerical insider, then Day and her organization were radical outsiders or lay

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁹ David J. O'Brien, *American Catholics and Social Reform: The New Deal Years* (Oxford Univ Pr, 1968), 120–49.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁴² Morris, *American Catholic*, 141.

⁴³ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 129.

people reclaiming the message of their Church as their own. Coughlin is more difficult to classify; he was an awkward fit in this newly confident American Catholicism.

Cardinal O'Connell of Boston was an early and prominent Catholic critic of Father Coughlin. In an April 1932 address, O'Connell echoed the concerns of conservative Catholics that a priest had no place in the political machinations of the secular state. He believed that Coughlin was using radio to speak above his priestly station, that his "hysterical addresses" were creating "disorder and confusion."⁴⁴ He felt that the serious religious mission of the Church was being undermined by Coughlin and that "you can't begin speaking about the rich, or making sensational accusations against banks and bankers, or uttering demagogic stuff to the poor. You can't do it for the Church is for all." He perceptively warned that "popularity is apt to go to their heads when they receive hundreds of letters...this popularity is like the bouquet thrown to the opera singer – sometimes it hits her on the head." O'Connell emphasized that he spoke as a citizen and not as a prince of the Church. This is consistent with the formal Catholic hierarchy of authority since only the Bishop of Detroit or the Pope could discipline Coughlin. Bishop Gallagher of Detroit had no intention of silencing his friend and favorite. He rebuked O'Connell, calling to Coughlin's defense the papal encyclicals: "I have no intention of interfering with Father Coughlin...(he) has said nothing stronger on these subjects than was said by Pope Leo or Pope Pius."⁴⁵

Undeterred, Coughlin continued to empathize with the poor and dispossessed in his sermons, but he lacked prescriptive detail on how best to support the needs of the unemployed. His exhortations were vague and focused on powerful business elites and communists, with the practical rights of labor a distant third. Wallace Stegner called Coughlin's broadcasts "yeasty

⁴⁴ Ward, *Father Charles Coughlin*, 265–71.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 270.

expressions of pseudo goodwill unimplemented with methods or approaches.”⁴⁶ Coughlin's deliberate ambiguity on the issue of unions is consistent with the Catholic establishment's wariness toward secular organized labor, especially the more militant Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which Catholics suspected of communist affiliation.⁴⁷ Communism in 1930s America was neither an abstract political concept nor a distant menace. In the midst of the failing capitalist experiment of Depression-era America, communism offered a viable option to the disenfranchised and the desperate. The Ford Hunger March of March 7th, 1932 was a seminal event in the Michigan labor struggle of the time. Thousands of unemployed workers marched to a Ford plant in Dearborn to protest and demand work. Ford security officers and local police awaited the protesters with cold water sprays that soon escalated to tear gas and bullets. Four marchers died and their funeral five days later attracted at least 10,000 mourners, a significant number of whom wore red armbands and red scarves. Mourners flew the red flag of communism and sang the *Communist Internationale*.⁴⁸ Coughlin's response the day after the funeral, the radio broadcast called *Ballots not Bullets*,⁴⁹ is illustrative of his focus at the time. He pointed out the contradiction of American laborers, amongst them American communists, being refused work from an American company that had recently signed a \$30 million contract with Soviet Russia. In an apparent contradiction of his own statements of the year before, he suggested that the unemployed should “place no undue blame upon the shoulders of Henry Ford.” He argued that “these jobless, hungry, dispossessed workmen were led...by a captain whose name is poverty.” The bulk of his sermon, however, focused on his newly evolving economic theories. Demonstrating a populist and isolationist take on international trade, he exhorted “our international bankers and international

⁴⁶ Stegner, “The Radio Priest and His Flock,” 242.

⁴⁷ O'Brien, *American Catholics*, 113–14.

⁴⁸ Vinyard, *Right in Michigan*, 123–24.

⁴⁹ Rev Chas E. Coughlin, *Father Coughlin's Radio Discourses 1931-1932* (The Radio League of the Little Flower, 1932), 227–39.

industrialists” to “keep American money for American people” by investing in America and not in foreign countries. While Coughlin’s anti-communism and sympathies for the poor were reflections of Catholic social teaching, his economic theories were based on less sound doctrinal footing.

Even though CBS abandoned him in 1931, Coughlin’s radio audience continued to grow. CBS had asked him to “tone down”⁵⁰ his attacks and he, characteristically, refused to do so. With the help of Leo Fitzpatrick and his private ‘phone-network,’ Coughlin expanded his broadcasting reach across the north and northeast of America “from Kansas City to Bangor, Maine.”⁵¹ He continued to lease phone lines and refuse commercial endorsements, presumably to maintain his independence and clerical integrity. After the 1932 election of Roosevelt, his sermons became increasingly economic in nature. His shifting positions evolved from reevaluating the gold standard to adopting the silver standard, and finally settled on the federal government asserting control over the money supply.⁵² Much like 21st century populist American opinion, Coughlin wished to abolish the Federal Reserve. A consistent theme in his shifting monetary theories was that “money was artificially scarce, and that bankers and financiers were the chief obstacles to constructive change.”⁵³ His continuing emphasis on banking elites and the communist menace helped create more enemies, initiated his break with FDR, and underpinned his later public anti-Semitism.

Father Coughlin was an effective and powerful mobilizing force for FDR during the 1932 election, but his relationship with the new presidential administration became increasingly complicated. The White House welcomed the political leverage afforded by Coughlin’s popularity, but he was ultimately

⁵⁰ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 100.

⁵¹ Ward, *Father Charles Coughlin*, 29.

⁵² Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 110–13.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 113.

marginalized by Roosevelt and his advisers due to his fringe fiscal theories, continuing personal attacks, and personal neediness. FDR considered Coughlin a demagogue who hopefully could be tamed, but who could never be fully trusted.⁵⁴ Coughlin expected a seat at the decision-making table after his support in 1932; when he didn't get it, he gradually broke with the new administration.⁵⁵ In 1933, the United States granted formal diplomatic recognition to the Soviet Union, which inflamed the virulently anti-Communist Coughlin. In 1934, the Treasury published a list of individuals holding silver futures, among them was the treasurer of The Radio League of the Little Flower.⁵⁶ This was embarrassing to Coughlin since he was, at that time, pushing for the re-monetization of silver. White House hostility grew when in 1935 Coughlin mobilized members of his newly organized National Union for Social Justice (NUSJ) to help Congress reject the ratification of FDR's World Court legislation.⁵⁷ Later that year, the Coughlin-sponsored Banking and Monetary Control Act went down in ignominious defeat at the hands of Roosevelt allies in Congress.⁵⁸ By 1936, Coughlin was alienated from – and in opposition to – the Roosevelt administration. The Great Depression had entered its eighth year, national unemployment was still close to 15%, and Coughlin believed that the administration's economic and monetary policies were at the root of the economy's failure to recover.

With the formation of the NUSJ, Coughlin became the leader of a socio-political movement and a publisher creating a weekly periodical called *Social Justice* in March 1936.⁵⁹ An analysis of the first edition is instructive as it references the papal encyclicals, but says little about the labor struggle. It has

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 109–11.

⁵⁶ Vinyard, *Right in Michigan*, 139.

⁵⁷ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 135–37.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 138–39.

⁵⁹ University of Detroit Mercy, “An Historical Exploration.” Social Justice Newspaper Collection. *Social Justice*, March 13, 1936.

detailed articles on politics, communism and the 'money question.' It additionally outlines the sixteen principles and organizational requirements of the NUSJ. Six of the sixteen principles can be correlated to the encyclicals of Leo XIII and Pius XI relating to the private ownership of property, freedom of worship, government support for the poor, and the rights of the laborer to organize and earn a just wage. The remaining ten principles are a jumbled mix of taxation and monetary policy recommendations. Members of the NUSJ came from Coughlin's audience of mid-western and northeastern white lower middle-class Catholics. Frustrated by the slow pace of economic recovery and seduced by the radio priest's charisma and promise of social justice, they sought a solution outside of the political mainstream.

Coughlin entered national presidential politics in 1936, forming the Union Party with fellow populists Francis Townsend and Gerald L. K. Smith. The Union Party nominated the uninspiring congressman William Lemke (hand-picked by Coughlin) as its presidential candidate in the upcoming general election. The campaign failed miserably. The voting public resolutely rejected Lemke; he garnered less than 2% of the national vote. With this failed political effort, Coughlin broke significantly with the Catholic and Democratic establishment. During the presidential campaign, Coughlin received stinging rebukes from influential Catholics, particularly John Ryan,⁶⁰ and clashed with his Detroit protégé Frank Murphy.⁶¹ During this time, Coughlin stepped out from the pulpit and the broadcasting booth, bringing his message live to rallies across the Northeast and Midwest. At a 1936 political rally in Cleveland, he famously took off his jacket and collar, referred to FDR as Franklin 'double-dealing' Roosevelt, called him a liar and then promptly collapsed on stage to the feverish applause of 40,000 attendees. Pictures of Coughlin at this and other rallies do not evoke the image of an authoritative uncle; he looks more like Benito Mussolini rallying

⁶⁰ O'Brien, *American Catholics*, 138.

⁶¹ Vinyard, *Right in Michigan*, 154–55.

his fascist loyalists. Newsreel footage of this and other rallies circulated widely, and almost certainly shattered the illusions of some radio listeners. Gone was the disembodied lilting voice of the Irish parish priest, replaced instead with an angry middle-aged man, shorn of his priestly garb, fists curled and railing against the world. In October of 1936, the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Pacelli, came to the United States to meet with Roosevelt and, separately, with the American Catholic hierarchy in Cleveland. This was a rare U.S. visit from the Vatican, but the Cardinal pointedly refused to meet with Bishop Gallagher of Detroit. When Gallagher returned to Detroit, he told Coughlin: "Boy, have I got news for you. You're finished."⁶² Three months later in January 1937, an embittered and angry Coughlin lost his mentor and protector when Gallagher died. Gallagher was replaced with the conservative Bishop Edward Mooney, who set about asserting greater control over his popular radio priest.

It was in this period, after humiliating electoral failure and without the paternalistic protection of Michael Gallagher, that Coughlin's message became explicitly anti-Semitic. Prior to 1938, a latent anti-Semitism could be found in his sermons with their emphasis on Jewish banking families "without either the blood of patriotism or Christianity flowing in their veins."⁶³ But he focused mainly on Anglo banking families, particularly JP Morgan, and his comments on Jewish bankers provoked no critical response. Coughlin's anti-Semitism broke into the open, however, when he offered a defense of *Kristallnacht* (The Night of Broken Glass) to his audience in 1938. Coughlin explained *Kristallnacht*, the first of the nation-wide anti-Jewish pogroms in Germany, as a justifiable Nazi response to Jewish leadership of the Communist movement, arguing that "communism and

⁶² Gallagher, "Radio Priest."

⁶³ Charles Coughlin, "Banks and Gold!," accessed November 24, 2014, http://research.udmercy.edu/digital_collections/coughlin_cou/broadcast_coubro/coubro_19330226_banks_and_gold.pdf.

Judaism are too closely interwoven for the national health of Germany.”⁶⁴ Responding to his critics, of which there were now many, he argued that he was not an anti-Semite but an anti-Communist. He argued that both movements, Nazism and Communism, should be opposed but that Nazism was the lesser of the two evils. He based this on the claim that Russian communists already had slaughtered twenty million Christians, compared to the 600,000 Jews persecuted during *Kristallnacht*, none of whom were reportedly killed.⁶⁵ In retrospect, this position is disturbing and confusing but, at the time, was not completely outside of mainstream American Catholic thought. While most American Catholics deplored the persecutions of Jews by European Fascist regimes, they still saw Fascism as preferable to Communism since it was the lesser of two evils. During the 1930s, millions of Russian Christians were displaced or killed by the Stalinist regime. Socialist-fueled civil war in Spain and anti-clericalism in Mexico resulted in the killing of priests and the destruction of church property. Most mainstream Catholics strongly criticized Coughlin’s anti-Semitism, but many American Catholics were “hurt and puzzled by the failure of other Americans to share their view of events in Mexico, Russia, and Spain.”⁶⁶ Cultural and status tensions within immigrant communities across the Northeast, particularly in Brooklyn between Irish/Italian and Jewish groups, also fueled Catholic anti-Semitism.⁶⁷ In some respects, Coughlin provided convenient cover for those who were anxious not to appear anti-Semitic; in criticizing him, they could “cloak themselves in rectitude.”⁶⁸ By modern standards, Coughlin’s public pronouncements on Jewish persecution make for uncomfortable listening, but he argued that he did nothing more than give voice to contemporary Catholic concerns – concerns that were consistent with his militant anti-communism.

⁶⁴ University of Detroit Mercy, “An Historical Exploration.” Broadcast book collection. *Persecution – Jewish and Christian*, Nov 20, 1938.

⁶⁵ Ibid. *Persecution – Jewish and Christian. Not Anti-Semitism but Anti-Communism*, Dec 4, 1938.

⁶⁶ O’Brien, *American Catholics*, 174–81.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Vinyard, *Right in Michigan*, 167–68.

Coughlin's public anti-Semitism continued through 1938 when he published in his *Social Justice* newspaper the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," a discredited anti-Semitic fiction purporting to document a Jewish plot to take over the world's finances. In his personal introduction to the reprint, he also rolled out classic anti-Semitic tropes that had nothing to do with communism – "that Jews killed Christ, that they had no nationality, and were gold hoarders bent on controlling the finances of the world."⁶⁹ Coughlin was not immune to the historical strain of anti-Semitism in the Catholic Church that centered on the view that Jews were Christ-killers and practitioners of the sin of usury. Coughlin, for his part, continued to deny he was an anti-Semite. He claimed he was merely anti-communist or anti-banking-elitist; and that he attacked only the atheistic bad Jews as prominent leaders of both institutions. He alleged that he had no problem with good religious Jews.⁷⁰ Coughlin's claims, however, that Jews were "the intellectual leaders...of Marxist atheism in Germany" are the same as those made by the Nazi propagandist Joseph Goebbels.⁷¹

By this time, Coughlin lost whatever perceived power he had to influence national events. His much-reduced listenership consisted of loyal Catholics, members of the Radio League of the Little Flower and the NUSJ. Prominent Catholics and politicians united in criticizing him and denying him a mass media platform for his bigotry and belligerence. He had a new bishop and a new Pope (Pius XII, the former Cardinal Pacelli). His *Social Justice* publication and radio broadcasts became subject to censorship by his Bishop Edward Mooney, who criticized Coughlin frequently and publicly. By 1940, the broadcasts ceased due to a self-imposed National Association of Broadcasters ban on controversial speech.⁷² By 1942, with the onset of the Second World War, the Justice

⁶⁹ Charles Coughlin, "The Protocols of Zion," *Social Justice*, July 25, 1938, 5–8.

⁷⁰ University of Detroit Mercy, "An Historical Exploration." Broadcast book collection. *Persecution – Jewish and Christian*, Nov 20, 1938.

⁷¹ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 266.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 267–68.

Department threatened to arrest Coughlin for sedition for his continued public defense of fascist regimes in Europe in *Social Justice*.⁷³ Bowing to pressure from his ecclesiastical superiors, he severed all ties to the newspaper he had helped create. Coughlin's career as a public commentator and political agitator was over. He returned to his day job as parish priest of Royal Oak.

Father Coughlin remained as parish priest until his retirement in 1966 and died in 1979, at the age of 88. An estimated 3,000 parishioners signed his funeral book, and the service was officiated by the Archbishop of Detroit.⁷⁴ The funeral mass was held in the grand Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak, now a Roman Catholic National Shrine. The shrine, constructed by Coughlin between 1931 and 1936 with funds from Radio League subscribers, represents his enduring legacy in Royal Oak. The central portion of the church is an octagonal structure, an unusual arrangement for a Catholic church of that era and one that puts the priest at the center of the mass, symbolic perhaps of Coughlin's desire to always be at the center of things. The main Charity Crucifixion Tower is a magnificent, 110-foot-tall zigzag art-deco granite structure with intricate carvings by noted sculptor Rene Paul Chambellan. Inscribed at the top - along with images of angels, cherubim and seraphim - are the home states of Radio League subscribers. The face of the Archangel Michael is none other than Bishop Michael Gallagher.⁷⁵ Coughlin's home also contained a portrait of Gallagher, silver-framed and flanked by alabaster busts of two Popes - Leo XIII and Pius XI.⁷⁶

In assessing Coughlin's social and political importance during the 1930s, it is tempting to focus only on his later anti-Semitism - especially with retrospective knowledge of the horrors to come in World War II. One of the texts cited in this

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ University of Detroit Mercy, "An Historical Exploration." The archive contains images of the funeral book with signatures of attendees and service details.

⁷⁵ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 105.

⁷⁶ Gallagher, "Radio Priest."

work claims that Coughlin is the “father of hate radio.”⁷⁷ But an exclusive focus on these last years of intolerance ignores his earlier popularity and does not explain how a Roman Catholic priest held 30 million listeners in thrall to a nineteenth-century papal doctrine of social justice. I suggest that apart from the striking shrine he created in Royal Oak, Coughlin’s most positive and enduring legacy is the role he played in spreading the message of social justice at a critical time in the social and economic life of America. To a modern critic, it is clear that this message did not comprehend gender or racial equality, but nor did most of the New Deal or other mainstream political initiatives of the 1930s. Efforts to transcend boundaries of race and gender were left to radicals outside of the Catholic mainstream, such as Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement. Coughlin’s biggest impact, therefore, is that he helped legitimize and popularize the ideals of social justice in the contemporary American political and public consciousness. He succeeded in this mission with a combination of personal charisma, mass media technology and a blended populist message of anger, indignation, and Catholic social teaching that resonated with a fearful and forgotten public.

Intrinsic to both Coughlin’s message and how he conveyed it was his Catholicism. He spoke with the certainty of a cleric, one steeped in the faith of his fathers, self-confident with Christ on his side. The paternalistic embrace of his Church, in the form of his bishop, buffered him from his critics. The Catholic Church’s anti-communist doctrine and historic position on the sins of Jews also informed Coughlin’s later anti-Semitism. In the end, after years of wandering the secular streets of power, he returned home to the Catholic Church. Coughlin over-reached politically because he had an overweening desire to be at the center of things, to be influential and allied with the powerful. Like the Catholic Church itself, Coughlin defies ready categorization. He, like the Church, is rich in complexity, controversy and contradiction. Some of his apparent contradictions

⁷⁷ Warren, *Radio Priest*.

also are bound up with the challenge of being Catholic in America, challenges that persist to this day. There is an American Catholic doctrinal and moral unease with the unequal concentration of wealth that runs counter to the prevailing capitalist ethos of the culture at large. The American cultural emphasis on individualism and political emphasis on the secular state also subverts natural law as understood by the Church. Father Coughlin navigated these contradictions in a very public way. His uncompromising personal character and 'Christ or Chaos' approach did not always translate well from the church pulpit to the town square. Religious passion and moral absolutism can give way to political fanaticism. Father Coughlin was bigoted and charming, intelligent and intellectually inconsistent, militant and mercurial. He was at once a conservative creature of his Church, from childhood unto death, and a contradictory Catholic iconoclast bent on confounding critics to the end. When asked in 1970 what he would do differently, he said "I would do it the same"⁷⁸; when asked the same question in 1972, he said "there is nothing I would do the same."⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, 268.

⁷⁹ Gallagher, "Radio Priest."

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