

Father Charles E. Coughlin: Beliefs and Influence during the Interwar Period

Thesis Prospectus by Student

MLA Program

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Charles E. Coughlin, 1891-1979, was born into a working class, immigrant family that was devoutly Catholic. According to one of his biographers, Louis B. Ward, Coughlin attended Mass each morning, was educated at a Catholic primary school, and St. Michael's College in Ontario, which was also a Church run school. Well educated, Ward describes Coughlin as a "...mind which...had been well plowed by the steel point of discipline...diligently planted with the seed of Christian philosophy and neatly hedged in both with the classics of the ancients and the artistry of the moderns."¹ In 1911 he decided to join the priesthood and was ordained in 1916. Soon after he was sent to Waco, Texas and then to the parish of St. Agnes Church in Detroit, Michigan, the city where he would preach and where his radio show would be broadcast from his office in the Shrine of the Little Flower. Ward goes on to state that Coughlin's "Voice, language, expression, gesticulation and, above all, a depth of sincerity began to attract the attention of the parishioners."² Coughlin's enthusiasm and fervor appealed to the citizens of Detroit. As a result, Detroit Catholics soon began flooding into his parish first, and then to the radio airwaves, which allowed him to gain an even wider audience.

Through his radio broadcasts it is clear that Father Coughlin was energetic and passionate, but most of his sermons had very little to do with the Christianity or Catholicism that gave him the power and legitimacy he needed to influence the American people. Coughlin spoke with confidence and authority and claimed time and again to have evidence to back his claims, but he used that evidence to make claims that he could not substantiate. Coughlin's audience was willing to believe his claims due

¹ Louis B. Ward, *Father Charles E. Coughlin: An Authorized Biography* (Detroit: Tower Publications, Incorporated, 1933), 12.

² Louis B. Ward, *Father Charles E. Coughlin: An Authorized Biography* (Detroit: Tower Publications, Incorporated, 1933), 15.

to his status, but he seems to be just one of a rash of Americans who used their position of power to influence their listeners on a particular issue. In Father Coughlin's case the topics he was most passionate about were anti-Semitism and anti-Communism. His extreme anti-Communist and anti-Semitic speeches provided rhetoric for an audience who were already fearful of outsiders and war. Researching Father Coughlin, one of the founders of hate radio, allows us an insight into how some politicians operate today. It seems that contemporary politicians are using some of the same tactics and language regarding minorities today that Coughlin used, which proves that anti-Semitism is just one of many ways to discriminate against others.

The broadcast from December 4, 1938, entitled "Persecution: Jewish and Christian," where he accused Russian Jews of planning the Russian Revolution and the Communist takeover is a particularly good example of Father Coughlin's anti-Semitic and anti-Communist tendencies. He states that the "...Central Committee of the Communist Party, operating in Russia, consisted of 59 members among whom were 56 Jews..."³ Alan Brinkley, author of *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression*, states that "Few listeners could understand or assimilate such detailed information... but that Coughlin appeared to have so many facts that his fingertips created an image of erudition and credibility."⁴ Media during the interwar period was limited and international news was even more so. Due to limited news coverage, particularly in rural areas, the people were less likely to get more than one point of view when it came to the news. Furthermore, it seems that Coughlin was well

³ Father Charles Coughlin, "Persecution: Jewish and Christian" (1938, Detroit: CBS/WJR Radio Station), Radio.

⁴ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 98.

informed politically. Living in Detroit allowed him greater access to media coverage which he used to support his arguments.

Father Charles E. Coughlin's thoughts and beliefs about the way the American government was being run during the Great Depression Era were clear through his broadcast, sermons, and newspaper. Coughlin was one of the most recognizable voices on the radio from 1929 to 1942. Out of Detroit, Coughlin spoke extensively about anti-Semitism, anti-Communism, anti-immigration, and anti-government. There were very few times during his twelve years on the radio when he used scripture and religion without them working toward his agenda, which many times was anti-Communist and anti-Semitic. Although Father Coughlin's radio show was broadcast throughout the Northeast and Midwest, there were very few stations that carried the show in the South and west of the Rocky Mountains. However, his following in those areas were passionate. Furthermore, Coughlin's strong anti-Semitic beliefs were not surprising given his Catholic upbringing. The Catholic Church was unquestionably anti-Semitic in their beliefs and teachings. That is not to say that the only Americans who listened to his broadcasts and read his sermons and newspaper were Catholics. 1929-1942 was the ideal time for Coughlin's emergence and popularity because the United States had suffered through a world war and soon after the most devastating economic depression in the country's history. Americans were ready and willing to hear Father Coughlin's message and his position as a priest seemed to give him the credentials he needed in the eyes of the people, both Catholic, Protestant, and to some extent, Jew.

1936 was the year things began to fall apart for Coughlin. He helped to organize the Union Party and pick the candidate the party hoped would defeat President Franklin

D. Roosevelt that same year. The election was a miserable defeat for both Coughlin and the Union Party, which led to his temporary retirement. Brinkley states that prior to the election Coughlin promised he would "...retire from public life- resign from broadcasting and return to his parish" if the Union Party's candidate did not obtain at least nine million votes.⁵ He retired for seven weeks and began broadcasting again on New Year's Day 1937, but his following had begun to weaken by that time. By 1938 his broadcasts and newspaper, *Social Justice*, still had an audience, but it was a "...different, less committed audience."⁶ That same year his anti-Semitic beliefs were becoming the predominant topic in both *Social Justice* and his broadcasts. He even went as far as publishing the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which is significant because news from Germany was slowly entering the United States by that point. Coughlin's followers were also torn about his open condemnation of President Roosevelt. It was clear that the American people loved Roosevelt because they elected him to the presidency four times, which was an unprecedented event. When Father Coughlin railed on Roosevelt both in his newspaper and over the radio his followers were confused. Coughlin's followers began to lose faith in him due to his anti-Semitic views and statements and hatred of President Roosevelt. His radio career came to an end in 1940 when the National Association of Broadcasters instituted new rules that

⁵ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 261.

⁶ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 266.

limited the air time for “spokesmen of controversial public issues,” which was not the first time an organization attempted to censor his statements.⁷

The previous information about Father Coughlin’s life and career will make up the first chapter of the thesis. The background information on Coughlin is crucial because it gives some insight into his decisions and beliefs. Chapter 1 will establish the need for in depth discussion of anti-Semitism, which was most prevalent in the Catholic Church prior to the Vatican II Council. The Christian tradition set the foundation for anti-Semitism which helped to lead to a number of atrocities against the Jewish people leading up to World War II and the Holocaust. Without an in depth discussion of the history of anti-Semitism leading up to the interwar period it is difficult to understand Father Coughlin’s stance on the Jewish people and the many accusations he made against them.

In order to better understand Father Coughlin’s role in history Chapter 1 will go on to discuss five separate topics, all of which will help to set the stage for his popularity in the interwar period. The radio became increasingly important and popular after World War I and during the Great Depression. It was a way for the American people to hear both domestic and international news and listen to entertaining broadcasts that would not have been available earlier in the century. By the 1920s radios were readily available which allowed for a large audience and Father Coughlin found it to be an incredibly useful tool. Without the radio Coughlin would not have been able to reach his audience that was mostly spread throughout the Midwest. Before television the radio

⁷ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 267.

revolutionized the way Americans received news, entertainment, and information. It allowed families to gather around it and listen to President Roosevelt's "Fireside Chats" and Father Coughlin's weekly broadcasts. If not for the radio Coughlin would not have gained the following he had because his messages would have been restricted to his pulpit and the parishioners at the Shrine of the Little Flower.

Secondly, the first chapter will discuss Detroit and its importance during the interwar period. Detroit has always been known for its mass production and industry, but what made it so fitting for Father Coughlin and his message. According to Brinkley, Coughlin was stationed in Waco, Texas before Detroit. Waco did not seem to be a good fit for him or his message. In fact, it is extremely doubtful that he would have been able to speak publicly in Waco about anti-Communism or anti-Semitism without some sort of backlash that resulted because Texas and its people probably would not have been as open to his ideas as those in the Northeast.. On the other hand, Detroit seemed to be a much more welcoming place for him and provided him with a fairly large audience from the community who were willing to hear what he had to say and support him and the church he helped to establish. Researching Detroit will allow for a better understanding of the economics, politics, and religious movements of the time in the city which allowed Coughlin to preach his message and gain support in Detroit and other cities throughout the Midwest.

Chapter 1 will also address American Catholicism. In the early 20th century Catholics were still seen as outsiders. In fact that image did not change entirely until President John F. Kennedy was elected. The United States was predominantly Protestant and the Catholic Church was not widely welcomed. However, Father

Coughlin's emergence seemed to allow for a new acceptance of Catholicism in certain parts of the country because his message was not strictly for Catholics. Those who listened to Coughlin, Catholic or not, were given a look into the Catholic Church and his message may have influenced their opinions on it. Father Coughlin was able to make American Catholicism a mainstream conversation both politically and socially. However, it seems that not all American priests had the same opinions as Coughlin and, while he may have been the most vocal, he did not represent the political or religious views of the entire Catholic Church.

The Great Depression will be the fourth topic discussed in Chapter 1. The economic depression drastically changed the American way of life and intensified the fear of those who were considered outsiders. Father Coughlin was able to take advantage of the fear and insecurity that the Great Depression brought to the country. Politically the depression was extremely complicated due to the many different aspects that brought it on. Several of Coughlin's broadcasts concentrated on the New Deal and the many bills that were in Congress that he disapproved of. Researching the Great Depression will allow us to understand the reason Coughlin's message was accepted by some Americans. Fear was a common theme throughout the Depression because their lives were changed very suddenly and, as a result, they were less trusting of the government at times and those whom they considered "outsiders."

Finally, Chapter 1 will cover American anti-Semitism. The United States had its own issues with anti-Semitism before World War II which was extremely problematic. It seems that Protestants were slowly able to accept Catholics, but the same was not true for the Jewish community. Americans saw them as threat to their religious beliefs due to

the belief that they were Christ killers. Not only were they considered Christ killers but they were also considered a threat economically. The American Jewish people were finding great success in the business world prior to the Great Depression and some found that to be threatening. That provided both Christians and non-Christians another reason to dislike and distrust the Jewish people around them. While American anti-Semitism never reached the European level it was still an issue that Jews were forced to face during and after World War II. Not only were American Jews considered problematic, but Jewish immigrants seemed to face twice the discrimination. Not only were they of the Jewish faith, but they were immigrants which Americans were also uncomfortable with. It is clear that the Jewish people did not pose a threat but that was not clear until after the war ended.

The second chapter will be a brief history of anti-Semitism that will lead into a more narrow discussion of Father Coughlin's personal anti-Semitic views. Through research for this chapter it is clear that the Jewish religion and those who practiced it were prime targets not just in Nazi Germany but internationally. Catholics and Protestants had every religious reason to distrust and dislike Jews due to Catholic teachings that originated from the Bible. Christian anti-Semitic beliefs have been traced back to Church leaders, such as St. Augustine of Hippo, and came to a climax with Pope Pius XII, who led the Catholic Church during the Second World War. Although anti-Semitism was widespread throughout Christianity prior to World War II and the Holocaust it seems that no other sect of Christianity taught it more adamantly than the Catholic Church. The Church stood firmly on the belief that Jews were Christ killers and used the Bible, particularly the Gospels in the New Testament, in order to substantiate

that belief. Catholicism was clearly a major influence on Father Coughlin and other anti-Semites, but influences such as economics and politics also gave them ample reason to hate their Jewish neighbors. Anti-Semitism also made its way into literature where Jewish characters were painted in a bad light. Just one example is F. Scott Fitzgerald's description of a Jew in *The Great Gatsby*. Furthermore, blatant lies and accusations were published about the Jewish people regarding their plans and past actions that included the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and Henry Ford's newspaper, *The Dearborn Independent*. Although the truth about Jews did not resemble what had been published about them, the fear of Jews and other outsiders was fed by Father Coughlin and his followers. The anti-Semitic voices in the Bible, Christian teachings, the news, and literature gave non-Jews reason to fear them, despite the fact there was no real reason to do so.

Anti-Semitism has been an issue since Christ's crucifixion and it developed to the point that it was uncontrolled for a time. Jews and Christians were obviously at odds religiously and it evolved and became less and less about religious matters. Christians in particular seemed to hate Jews because that is what the churches taught throughout history, but the strict religious reasons for hating them became less relevant. However, religion was not the only factor for anti-Semites. There were a number of things people disliked about Jews and Coughlin integrated those anti-Semitic problems into his broadcasts. Father Coughlin's sermons and broadcasts contain a number of anti-Semitic statements, but the majority of his accusations against the Jewish people have very little to do with the religious separation between Judaism and Christianity. That point is particularly relevant when Hitler and the Holocaust are

discussed because there is very little evidence to support that Hitler's anti-Semitic views were in any way religiously based. The actions against Jews, particularly those in Eastern Europe, during the interwar period and the Holocaust led to significant change in the way non-Jews and Christians view the Jewish people. However, people like Father Coughlin and others, both in and out of the Catholic Church, helped to shape the views people had of Jews internationally. It is unfortunate that it took the events of the Holocaust for non-Jews to recognize that their beliefs were problematic. It is possible that without the Holocaust anti-Semitism could still be an issue that was as large or larger than it was during the interwar period.

Father Coughlin found success during the interwar period because the American people were ready to hear his message. Although his sermons and broadcasts were not always politically, economically, and socially extreme, they took that turn with the onset of the Great Depression. Due to the great losses the United States suffered during World War I and the economic situation, the American people were uncomfortable and afraid of the unknown. Anti-Semitism was also a widespread belief internationally and in the United States. As a result, there was very little resistance when Coughlin began discussing and blaming Jews for things such as Communism. Father Coughlin also had a surprisingly strong influence over his followers politically. Several times in his broadcasts he seems to order his listeners to write to their senators to stop them from passing legislation coming out of the New Deal. The American people wanted action, but Coughlin, particularly near the end of the 1930s, led them to believe through the "evidence" he provided that there were serious issues with New Deal legislation. The "evidence" Coughlin presented was meant to prove that New Deal legislation and

organizations were wrong and President Roosevelt was not doing the country any favors. The radio also played a major role in Coughlin's public success because it allowed him to reach a wider audience. Without that technology his voice would not have reached such a broad audience, particularly those in rural areas. It is also possible that Coughlin was providing information to his followers that they would not have received otherwise. News was not as readily available at the time, particularly in rural areas, and if the people had a radio, they were able to listen to the powerful people of the time that included Huey Long and President Roosevelt, not just Father Coughlin.

The third chapter will discuss Father Coughlin's impact. Although his anti-Semitic beliefs and his hatred of Communism was far reaching at the time they were topics that the American people were ready and willing to hear. Coughlin's sermons and newspapers helped to persuade his followers about the issues he thought were not only important but were a threat to the United States and the American way of life. Given the economic and political climate in the country during the interwar period Coughlin's seemed to want radical change. As a result, Father Coughlin not only influenced their opinions, but he also seemed to be the voice his followers needed to express their fears of Jews, Communism, and immigration. Once news of the Holocaust began to reach the United States the American people began to realize that the Jewish people were not the enemy they believed them to be. While Coughlin seemed to fall from grace and fame fairly quickly prior to the United States entering World War II his impact on history is relevant due to the large following he found. Prejudice and racism is still an issue throughout the world, but Father Coughlin's sermons, broadcasts, and newspaper are examples that can be used to show the extreme prejudice that existed during the

interwar period and the way his followers reacted. Had the prejudices Father Coughlin spoke and taught about not already existed in the United States it is unlikely that he would have found the following he did. The fame and prominence he was able to obtain was not simply from the position he held in the Catholic Church, but from the fact that he was expressing beliefs that were already on the surface. Not only did he express those fears, but the authority he portrayed gave his followers reason to listen to his beliefs and, in most cases, adopt those same beliefs.

The thesis will consist of three chapters. In order to complete the thesis there will be information pulled from a variety of sources, both primary and secondary. A majority of the primary sources material will come from a large archive of Coughlin's recorded radio broadcasts, his newspaper *Social Justice*, and archived sermons. The sermons will come from boxes the University of South Florida holds and the online/digitized archives from the University of Detroit Mercy. The secondary sources will consist of a variety of studies in sociology, history, and religion, particularly Christianity and Catholicism. The sociological sources will come from authors such as Max Weber, Peter Berger, William Sewell, Jr., and Christian Smith. At least two biographies of Father Coughlin, one of which he had a major hand in, will be included that which will give some insight into his beliefs, rise to prominence, career, and ultimate demise. There will also be articles from prominent magazines and newspapers such as *Time* and the *New York Times*, both of which are available online and published several articles about Coughlin, his sermons, his public relationship with President Roosevelt and other members of the government, and governmental policies. Finally, there will be

secondary sources from academic journals which will further help the argument the thesis will present.

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