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COMPETING AMERICAS: LETTERS TO THE FCC ON FATHER CHARLES COUGHLIN

BY

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BA, Brandeis University, 2016

THESIS

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ABSTRACT

COMPETING AMERICAS:

LETTERS TO THE FCC ON FATHER CHARLES COUGHLIN

by

Alyssa Roy

University of New Hampshire, May 2020

On November 20, 1938, Father Charles Coughlin—colloquially known as the Radio Priest—gave a speech over the radio in which, among other things, he blamed the Jewish victims of *Kristallnacht* for their own suffering. This speech sparked a storm of protest and counterprotest, exemplified by more than one thousand letters sent to the Federal Communications Commission from 1938 to 1939. Americans on both sides of the controversy wrote to the FCC to express their approval or disapproval of Coughlin’s program, and to call on the agency to act in some way. In reacting to Coughlin, these Americans spoke to larger conversations about citizenship, freedom of speech, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, and what it means to be an American.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

Americans who had an opinion about Father Charles Coughlin—positive or negative—sought to share those opinions with the Federal Communications Commission, especially during the mid- to late- 1930s, though his true heyday had largely passed. This little-used archival collection of letters drives my thesis. Not including form letters sent in bulk, just under 1600 letters to the FCC have been preserved at the College Park, MD United States National Archives. Americans also sent form letters individually, and given the way in which they were filed (interspersed among other letters, with no particular indication that they were a form letter), I have included them in the final number and in my selection method. For the purposes of this thesis, I will define “form letter” as any letter in which the bulk of the text is the same, allowing for minor variations—a letter that was not written extemporaneously by an individual American, but rather to which the sender had only to add his or her name and address to a pre-written missive.

I will focus primarily on the years 1938 and 1939, in which the bulk of the letters were sent: over 1300 of the 1570 letters were from these two years alone. Controversy especially surrounded Coughlin and the radio in 1938 (particularly late 1938), so it is not surprising that the majority of the letters would be from that year.¹ Of course, it is entirely possible—indeed, probable—that the letters in the College Park archive do not represent all of the letters sent to the FCC in other years. Perhaps 1937 saw a nearly-as-large number of letters, but these letters have since been lost. Such speculation is interesting but ultimately pointless: the data available to me suggests that from 1938-1939, Americans wrote to the FCC concerning Father Coughlin in far

¹ See David Goodman, “Before Hate Speech: Charles Coughlin, Free Speech and Listeners’ Rights,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 49, no. 3 (2015): 199–224. DOI: 10.1080/0031322X.2015.1048972.

greater numbers than they previously had, or would again. I regard this as worthy of note and of study, with the aforementioned caveat in mind.

Given the number of letters in these two years, I determined to select for a certain number, as randomly as I could realistically achieve. Since the letters vary greatly in length, with some as short as a few lines and others covering several pages, I selected for approximately a third of the letters by manually counting from the total pool of letters, with the end result of 318 letters representing 1938 and 118 representing 1939. I then determined the following categories for each letter, to the best of my ability: the gender of the writer (or genders, if multiple writers signed the same letter), their location, whether they were for, against, or held a more neutral attitude towards Coughlin, whether or not the letter was a form letter, if it was typed, handwritten, or a telegram, the person or organization to whom the letter was addressed, and whether or not the letter mentioned specific topics, such as free speech or the First Amendment, columnist Dorothy Thompson, and New York City radio station WMCA. In some instances, I could not identify the gender or location of the writer—because it was illegible or not included at all, or, as was occasionally the case, because of an unluckily-placed hole punch or staple.

I identify two significant drawbacks with this method of selection: first, I may miss letters of great import this way, or miss interesting trends—for example, I noted that a number of like-minded women wrote from Minneapolis, Minnesota around the same time. Perhaps my selection method missed many more letters in a similar vein. The second drawback involves form letters. Some organizations sent their form letters bound in bulk to the FCC, and they remain bound today. Naturally, it is easy to identify those form letters as such, but some sent in form letters individually, and in far fewer numbers. I included individually sent form letters in my sample. But the only real method I possessed to identify these individual form letters as such

was reliant on my own memory for specific turns of phrase. If my sample happened by coincidence to avoid all other examples of a form letter, with only one selected into the sample itself, then it is entirely possible that I mistakenly identified a form letter as personally written. This is of minor consequence at worst, however; while the text may not have been original, for a man or woman to sign his or her name under that text surely indicated that the sentiment was truly felt, regardless of the origin of the words themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Struck by the unforgiving Great Depression and fearful of another horrific conflict, Father Charles Coughlin, the Radio Priest, spoke. Americans responded. Historian Bruce Lenthall writes that “listeners latched onto a Roosevelt, a Coughlin, a [Dr. John] Brinkley, in part because such speakers offered listeners something they desperately wanted in the 1930s.”¹ Many of Coughlin’s supporters valued him so because they believed that he (and, as they sometimes expressed, *only* he) told the entire, unedited, grisly truth—and to silence him was to silence that truth, maybe forever.² “If he has become an ‘enemy’ of some it is only because they dislike the truth to be known. We want to continue to know the truth, and not be left in the dark,” wrote one such supporter.³ And, Lenthall continues, “it was precisely because broadcasters offered listeners something they desired so fiercely that radio champions were so dangerous.”⁴ Perhaps the truth that Coughlin’s adherents desired in particular was the truth of how the world was run, and of how to “fix” it to the advantage of the average American. Many adored Coughlin for his message, for his charisma and presence, palpable even over the radio, or for reasons of their own. But many did not. What separated them was a fundamental disagreement about what Coughlin stood for, and moreover, a disagreement about what it meant to be an American.

¹ Bruce Lenthall, *Radio’s America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 123. Dr. John Brinkley dispensed questionable medical advice around the same time as Coughlin; Lenthall argues that Coughlin and Brinkley in particular were quite similar on a number of levels, though they “are never linked in the standard historical accounts of the 1930s” (120).

² David Goodman, “Before Hate Speech: Charles Coughlin, Free Speech and Listeners’ Rights,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 49, no. 3 (2015): 213. DOI: 10.1080/0031322X.2015.1048972: “Belief in truth and the right to speak truth were key components of this vernacular debate: Coughlin, it was said, should or should not be allowed to broadcast because he did or did not speak the truth.”

³ Letter from Francis E. Hogan to the FCC, 10 October 1939: National Archives, College Park, MD (hereafter NA), FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

⁴ Lenthall, 139.

As a source of his readers' and listeners' opinions, the Letters to the Editor section of Coughlin's periodical *Social Justice* is unexpectedly wanting. In his exhaustive biography of Coughlin, sociologist Donald Warren argues that though Coughlin was not officially the editor of *Social Justice*, he was the behind-the-scenes mastermind; he relays an instance in which the editor in name only, E. Perrin Schwartz, told an FBI agent, "There is nothing in the Social Justice magazine that Father Coughlin doesn't want, and if it can be predetermined nothing is put in there he would not want."⁵ Some articles had no author listed, and were perhaps written by the periodical's staff. But Warren goes further, arguing that even some articles explicitly listed under other names were written by Coughlin: not only did he write a series of inflammatory, anti-Semitic articles under the name Ben Marcin, but the FBI also "concluded that most [letters to the editor] were written by Coughlin himself."⁶

But another, more reliable source of letters exists: Coughlin's supporters and detractors alike, determined to contribute their opinions, requests, and demands to the conversation surrounding Coughlin specifically, and the airwaves more broadly, wrote en masse to the Federal Communications Commission. They scribbled their pleas, demands, and questions on notebook paper and hotel stationery. In ten lines and in ten pages, they called for change or for things to stay the same. They wrote to Commissioner Frank McNinch directly, to the FCC in general, to President Roosevelt, to their senators and representatives, and to varying governmental institutions that they imagined had a hand or a stake in what passed over the airways. Convinced that the FCC was bound to do their bidding as American citizens (or as taxpayers or purveyors of radio programs), many demanded that the Commission control radio stations and, depending on

⁵ Qtd. in Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 250.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 152, 250.

their point of view, either prevent Coughlin from speaking or prevent radio stations from “discriminating” against him. An intriguing third category existed, too: some Americans wrote to the FCC and argued that while they were not Coughlin supporters, they believed the issue to be a Constitutional one, and they were duty-bound to protest against Coughlin’s removal from the air, because they viewed that removal as a violation of the First Amendment. Though eighty years of distance might cast an aura of absurdity over these claims, picture instead an outraged American writing to the current FCC Commissioner, Ajit Pai, and demanding that he disallow Rush Limbaugh from broadcasting—an event that has certainly occurred.⁷ Letter-writers, then as now, had reason to expect that their opinions and demands would hold weight.

In this thesis, I will examine the hopes, fears, and demands that Americans conveyed in these letters to the FCC. Many were prompted to write by a particularly anti-Semitic broadcast of Coughlin’s, mere days after *Kristallnacht*; the confluence of events surrounding Coughlin’s speech prompted these letter-writers to share their thoughts. These letters address Americans’ thoughts about freedom of speech, prejudice, and the responsibilities and rights of American citizens as these “ordinary” Americans saw them. They tell us, in turn, how Americans viewed these issues in the late 1930s through their thoughts about and opinions of the Radio Priest.

⁷ Though not necessarily aimed directly at Pai, people, from Jane Fonda to the “average” American, have been asking/demanding the FCC to deal with Limbaugh for years. Beryl Lipton, “FCC Complaints Demand End to Rush Limbaugh’s ‘bullsh*t.’” *Muckrock*, September 22, 2016. Accessed March 8, 2020. <https://www.muckrock.com/news/archives/2016/sep/22/rush-limbaugh-fcc-complaints/> and Jane Fonda, Robin Morgan, and Gloria Steinem, “FCC Should Clear Limbaugh from Airwaves.” *CNN*, March 12, 2012. Accessed March 8, 2020. <https://www.cnn.com/2012/03/10/opinion/fonda-morgan-steinem-limbaugh/index.html>.

1. The Radio Priest: A Brief Background

One of the most interesting aspects of sociologist Donald Warren's comprehensive biography of Father Charles Coughlin is its look to the future—to Warren's present day, the mid-1990s. He sees Coughlin, the eponymous Radio Priest, as the "founding father" of radio preachers and televangelists: "he...established a precedent for future religious figures who would build political movements based on media audiences."¹ And while we can only hazard an educated guess as to the size of his radio audience at its peak, historian Alan Brinkley argues that it may have been "up to 40 million people"—a sizeable number, given that America's population numbered around 122 million as of the 1930 census.²

But Warren's conception of Coughlin as proto-televangelist could be extended further, to another figure who, though admittedly not religious, built his own political movement on the back of his extensive use of mass media. Of course, as *Radio Priest* was published in 1996, Warren could not possibly have predicted the birth of social media or what was to come in 2016, but it is easy to compare Coughlin's inflammatory statements and mass following to the rise of President Donald Trump, who has used Twitter and his own TV career to great effect. Thus, Coughlin could also be considered a proto-President Trump, albeit without the political success. Both had a considerable following. Both might be said to have a dubious grasp of the "issues,"

¹ Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 28, 3.

² Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, & the Great Depression* (New York: Random House, 1982), 92. U.S. Census Bureau, "Population of the United States and Its Outlying Territories and Possessions: 1930, 1920, and 1910," Population--United States Summary, accessed April 11, 2020, <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1930/population-volume-1/03815512v1ch02.pdf>. This number refers to the continental United States only. Historian Charles Tull writes that Coughlin's audience was "estimated at thirty million." Charles J. Tull, *Father Coughlin & The New Deal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965), 20. The very first issue of *Social Justice* in 1936 put forth a "conservatively estimated" guess of "twelve to fifteen million persons" ("This First Edition," *Social Justice*, March 13, 1936, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 1). Therefore, it is probably not incorrect to state that Coughlin's audience was somewhere in the tens of millions.

whatever those might be; Brinkley writes that Coughlin “did not begin his career as a social commentator...with well-developed political theories.”³ And both were pioneers of a new kind of political connection with the American people; what Twitter has been to President Trump, radio was to Coughlin.⁴ Studying Coughlin, then, has increased relevance today, especially considering the open hostility that has gripped American politics as of late.

Charles Coughlin was born in 1891, to Catholic parents who from his formative years envisaged him in the priesthood.⁵ He was ordained in 1916, and from the start was a divisive figure, alienating his fellow priests and stirring up behind-closed-doors controversy and gossip.⁶ In Warren’s telling, he was a charismatic figure, but not a popular one among his peers; he would allegedly make various accusations against other priests during his time as a faculty member at Assumption College.⁷ In 1924, he was ordered to a diocese outside of Detroit, Royal Oak, and it was from there that his radio career began.⁸ In 1926, Coughlin started broadcasting as a way to perhaps earn some money for his cash-strapped parish, as well as “a creative means to extend far beyond [Royal Oak’s] two dozen parish families.”⁹ He certainly extended much farther. Brinkley contends that Coughlin’s decision to enter broadcasting was also influenced by a cross-burning in front of Coughlin’s church, courtesy of the Ku Klux Klan, although Warren questions whether or not such an event actually occurred.¹⁰ Coughlin’s broadcasts did not remain consistent in subject over the course of his career; Brinkley writes that broadcasts that were “once pleasant discourses on the life of Christ and the lessons of the Bible became after 1930

³ Brinkley, 96.

⁴ Ibid., 97: “Coughlin was exploiting a system of communication whose potential conventional politicians had not yet begun to appreciate.”

⁵ Ibid., 84.

⁶ Warren, 8-15.

⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁸ Ibid., 14.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Brinkley, 82; Warren, 17-19.

almost exclusively political in content.”¹¹ Coughlin began broadcasting on Detroit station WJR in 1926, which served as his sole broadcaster for 156 broadcasts; in 1929, Chicago station WMAQ and Cincinnati station WLW began to broadcast him as well, and by 1930, Coughlin was “successful in procuring the facilities of the Columbia Broadcasting System.”¹² In 1931, Coughlin arranged the setup of his own network of 26 stations “from Maine to Colorado.”¹³

Although the success of the radio program clearly at least began with Coughlin’s religious content—and, of course, with Coughlin himself—his explosive success can only be attributed to his increasingly political nature.¹⁴ But Coughlin’s inherent talent must not be overlooked. “He had, said writer Wallace Stegner... ‘a voice of such mellow richness, such manly, heart-warming, confidential intimacy, such emotional and ingratiating charm, that anyone tuning past it on the radio dial almost automatically returned to hear it again.’”¹⁵ A select few of Coughlin’s broadcasts are available on YouTube, and they can only reinforce Stegner’s point for the modern listener. One might easily imagine him onstage, declaiming Shakespearian soliloquies.¹⁶ Indeed, his voice is theatrical, but not unduly so; intense, but not overwhelming; smooth and intelligible, each syllable enunciated clearly.¹⁷

Scholars differ over just how big Coughlin’s radio audience grew, and Coughlin himself was often given to embellishment.¹⁸ His paper, *Social Justice*, began publication in 1936 to a nationwide audience.¹⁹ But regardless of the actual numbers, his broadcasts and his periodical

¹¹ Brinkley, 83.

¹² Tull, 3-4. Tull also notes that CBS would no longer broadcast Coughlin by 1931 (7).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴ Brinkley, 92.

¹⁵ Quoted in Brinkley, 92.

¹⁶ Indeed, Brinkley points out that during his time as a teacher, he “supervised the drama society” (88).

¹⁷ jcm. “Charles Coughlin – Americanism, Neither Nazism Nor Communism (1939).” YouTube Video, 48:54, October 3, 2013. Accessed April 11, 2020. <https://youtu.be/6jRAoUWcYss>.

¹⁸ Brinkley, 119.

¹⁹ Warren, 76.

did, for a time, reach a vast number of Americans; at least 10% of the population tuned in regularly. In its early stages, Coughlin's popularity is easily attributable to his message. While historian David Kennedy notes that many of Coughlin's followers were, in fact, "lower-middle-class Catholics," that was not the extent of Coughlin's appeal.²⁰ Speaking to the everyman, he "offered a message of real meaning," Brinkley argues, though his ideology was "muddled and simplistic, at times nearly incoherent."²¹ This is almost comical given Warren's far more ominous depiction of Coughlin, but the truth is likely somewhere in the middle.²² While the minutiae of Coughlin's arguments might have shifted, the underlying message of bigotry, especially with relation to anti-Semitism, rarely shifted—but it did grow more pronounced as time passed. His increasingly clear anti-Semitism, as will be discussed in the following chapter, was inextricable from what was perhaps his most favorite target: communism and communists. For but one example of many, he wrote in 1938: "Rather than grasp the 'brotherly' hand so hypocritically extended to us, we must push away that hand at all times and under all conditions. WE MUST MAKE IT IMPOSSIBLE FOR THAT HAND EVER TO STAIN THE INSTITUTIONS OF AMERICA AS IT HAS THOSE OF OTHER NATIONS!"²³

Although anti-Semitism and anti-communism could hardly be called rare in mid-twentieth century America, Coughlin did not owe his popularity solely to intolerance. Glen Jeansonne writes that while Coughlin gained "instant credibility and a flock of Catholics" simply because he was a priest, he also gained and retained other listeners because of both his style and

²⁰ David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945*. Kindle Edition. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 228.

²¹ Brinkley, 143.

²² Warren, 3. Warren writes that Coughlin did not see himself "entering the political arena...as a priest cum politician;" rather, he saw himself as "a martyr sacrificed on the altar of religious principle" (6). His work shows a much more calculating and shrewder Coughlin than Brinkley describes, but Warren, quoting Coughlin's bishop, also describes Coughlin as "'not balanced' and 'out of control'" (6).

²³ "Shall We Grasp the 'Brotherly' Hand of Communism?" *Social Justice*, June 20, 1938, vol. 1A, no. 16, p. 23.

his substance.²⁴ “He could issue jeremiads, but he could also promise to lead the masses out of the depression into the brilliant sunny slopes of vindication.”²⁵ His early followers were entranced by the sincerity with which he addressed their problems and promised workable solutions. “I am convinced,” wrote a listener from Wisconsin, “that he is a capable and trustworthy leader. He is not seeking any personal gain nor is he fighting for any party or group of people, but for the welfare of all people.”²⁶ In this view, Coughlin was a selfless man, above petty party politics and factionalism, seeking only to benefit every American who suffered. In the midst of the Great Depression, this was surely an inspiring and welcome message. In his radio broadcasts, his listeners heard someone who cared about them, who understood their plight, and who wanted to propose effective solutions to fix it; indeed, Coughlin championed the right of an individual to work for a living wage, to organize, and to strike.²⁷ “Not in vain did Jesus Christ say, ‘Give us this day our daily bread,’” he wrote in the second issue of *Social Justice*. “Not in vain did He multiply five loaves of bread to feed five thousand hungry mouths...believing that this same Jesus Christ is with us today...my faith bids me to cling fast to these hopes of reconstructing society through the help of Him who promised not to leave us orphans.”²⁸ Amid Coughlin’s turn to politics, Brinkley writes, he “insisted that he was simply responding to his instinctive sympathy for the poor.” Brinkley opines that “it was a self-serving explanation...but not an implausible one.”²⁹ Whatever the depths to which he would later sink, it is certainly

²⁴ Glen Jeansonne, “The Priest and the President: Father Coughlin, FDR, and 1930s America,” *The Midwest Quarterly* 53, no. 4 (Summer 2012): 361. <https://eds-a-ebscohost-com.unh.idm.oclc.org/eds/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=3&sid=ffd018a0-596d-47fc-ab0f-7aa538c58d05%40sessionmgr104>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 361.

²⁶ “The People Speak,” *Social Justice*, March 13, 1936, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 13.

²⁷ “Human Rights Are Divine Rights!” *Social Justice*, March 27, 1936, vol. 1, no. 3, p. 4.

²⁸ “Father Coughlin’s Weekly Letter: What Is Important?” *Social Justice*, March 20, 1936, vol. 1, no. 2, p. 16.

²⁹ Brinkley, 94.

possible that Coughlin believed himself to be acting in the best interest of the average American.³⁰

But Coughlin was not universally praised. He was inevitably the target of anti-Catholic sentiment, which ran rampant well into the twentieth century. Historian John P. Diggins suggests that American liberals especially may have been predisposed to reject Coughlin at his high point of popularity, arguing, “at no other time did relations between liberals and Catholics become so openly tense as in the late 1930s.”³¹ Many of those who listened to his radio program, as I will illustrate later, disagreed vehemently with Coughlin’s statements and were eager to express their dissent in a way that they hoped would have some impact.

The Fascist Question(s)

In his examination of Huey Long and Coughlin, Brinkley briefly tackles the question of whether or not these two figures, often called “fascist” by contemporaries and in retrospect, actually merited the label. Brinkley analyzes the charges, detailing what exactly was and has been said about Long and Coughlin. Though he acknowledges that there is some evidence—mildly compelling, in Coughlin’s case, at least—that he was a fascist, Brinkley finally concludes that “they were not...fascists in any meaningful sense of the term.”³² The cry of fascism has persisted, he posits, because fascism is often in the eye of the beholder, and “because of the difficulties in finding any other political label that seems appropriate.”³³ The suggestion that Coughlin is only called “fascist” for lack of a better word is ultimately unsatisfying, but a

³⁰ See also Jeansonne, 364.

³¹ John P. Diggins, “American Catholics and Italian Fascism,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, no. 4 (Oct. 1967): 52. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/259822>.

³² Brinkley, 282.

³³ *Ibid.*

definitive answer may be impossible to discern. Though Coughlin, his broadcasts, and his periodical never openly advocated for a fascist America, instances of support, from cautious to outright, for Hitler and Mussolini abound. Is that enough to call the Radio Priest a fascist?

Warren's *Radio Priest* provides a far more in-depth and indeed more sinister picture of Coughlin than Brinkley's work. Warren, like Brinkley, does not seek to provide the ultimate answer to the fascist-question, but he does look beyond public knowledge, exposing a multitude of fascist and Nazi contacts, which he argues betray at the very least a strong sympathy for fascism, if not outright embrace of it.³⁴ Brinkley's assertion that Coughlin was probably not a fascist in private *or* in public fades in the face of such evidence. But whether Coughlin was a fascist is perhaps not the most pertinent question. Since the term can take a variety of meanings, then determining whether or not he was actually a fascist is less important than why Americans accused Coughlin of fascism in the first place.

Whereas Brinkley contends that "there is nothing to suggest that [Coughlin] ever communicated with or even thought much about Hitler, Mussolini, or any other European fascist leader; and there is nothing to imply that the Europeans...were more than dimly aware of the existence of...Coughlin," writing a dozen years later Warren found evidence that Coughlin in fact had those connections.³⁵ Behind closed doors, Warren argues, Coughlin not only sympathized with fascists, he was also associated with them and their sympathizers: he points out a number of English fascists with whom Coughlin maintained correspondence, as well as members of the German-American Bund.³⁶ He also notes that the Nazis certainly thought about Coughlin: "the Nazi regime came to recognize that its greatest allies [in keeping America out of

³⁴ Warren, 98.

³⁵ Brinkley, 274-275.

³⁶ Warren, 98-114, 178.

World War II] were those who were clearly identified as native patriots...Coughlin thus became...[an] attractive resource,” and a Coughlin contact subsequently journeyed to Germany, although little came of it publicly.³⁷

Coughlin not only concerned himself with Germany, however: Philip Cannistraro and Theodore Kovaleff argue that Coughlin’s “activities were carefully followed in Rome since they could serve as a valuable instrument for advertising Italian Fascism in America.”³⁸ Furthermore, they note that Coughlin *did* actually write to Mussolini; they cite a letter Coughlin sent in 1933, in which he hints that in order to solve the world’s economic ills, gold ought to be appropriated from bankers who have “manipulated [it] for [their] purposes to the detriment of civilization.” “There will be no advantage whatsoever in reducing this proposal to practice in America unless Italy and the major European nations cooperate,” Coughlin concludes, asking Mussolini to consider his proposal.³⁹ Cannistraro and Kovaleff note that the Italian government even sent a polite but firm reply in which it declined to accept Coughlin’s proposal, but “diplomatic agents were advised to maintain close watch on Coughlin.”⁴⁰ They also write of another letter Coughlin sent to Mussolini in 1938, arguing that this letter in particular “illustrates the extent to which Coughlin misunderstood the nature of Italian policies,” and noting that the March 27, 1939 issue of *Social Justice* provides an example of Coughlin defending “Fascist racial policies.”⁴¹ They decline to say what this example is. They may be referring to an article entitled “Why Mussolini Turned On Jews,” with no author listed. The conclusion of the short article provides the strongest clue:

³⁷ Warren, quote on 180, 178-184.

³⁸ Philip Cannistraro and Theodore Kovaleff, “Father Coughlin and Mussolini: Impossible Allies,” *Journal of Church and State* 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1971): 431. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23914185>.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 432-433.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 437.

Unfortunately, [Jews in Italy] abused their positions to impose their alien point of view upon the Italians. They were encouraged in this endeavor by the thousands of Jewish refugees from other countries who had sought an asylum in Italy. Looking at some neighboring states and overseas, Mussolini found Jews in the forefront of every subversive movement...Fascism was not anti-Jewish, but most Jews were anti-Fascist.⁴²

Jews are painted as the aggressors, not Mussolini and his ilk. They invaded Italy, desiring asylum; they sought to force their not just differing, but *alien*, views on the unwilling Italians. They, the article hints, opposed fascism for no reason other than to be subversive. In other words, according to the author of this article—if it was indeed Coughlin—whatever oppression the Jews faced under Mussolini, it was of their own doing. They had brought it upon themselves. Whether or not Coughlin himself wrote this article, other sources make it plain that he held the same point of view.⁴³

Ultimately, Cannistraro and Kovaleff conclude that “the relationship between Coughlin and Mussolini’s Italy had always been one-sided.”⁴⁴ But it is remarkable that such a relationship, as well as Coughlin’s relationship with Nazis and Nazi sympathizers, existed at all. Had Coughlin’s attempts to engage Italy and Germany been widespread public knowledge at the time, would they have influenced any of his supporters to embrace Coughlin further, or spurn him entirely? Some sections of the population certainly condemned Coughlin for his intolerance and anti-Semitism, and Warren notes that “many on the political left viewed him as representing the threat of fascism” in America.⁴⁵ John Morton Blum writes that many Americans were suspicious

⁴² “Why Mussolini Turned On Jews,” *Social Justice*, March 27, 1939, vol. 3A, no. 13, p. 11.

⁴³ See the following chapter for a discussion of Coughlin’s *Kristallnacht* speech, wherein he plainly illustrates his views concerning Jewish culpability for their own fate. See also Warren’s assertion that Coughlin himself oversaw much of what went into *Social Justice*, even if his name was not on it: Coughlin’s editor, E. Perrin Schwartz, said that “There is nothing in the Social Justice magazine that Father Coughlin doesn’t want, and if it can be predetermined nothing is put in there he would not want” (qtd. in Warren, 250).

⁴⁴ Cannistraro and Kovaleff, 443.

⁴⁵ Warren, 74.

of and disliked those who came from some Axis-power countries, and those who sympathized with them.⁴⁶ This was probably further compounded by the fact that Coughlin was a Catholic priest. But Blum also notes that many Italian-Americans, for example, took great pride in Mussolini's victories before America entered World War II.⁴⁷ In the case of anti-German sentiment, Blum writes that "there was no anti-German hysteria," but "there did persist considerable anti-Semitism...and a related indifference to the plight of the Jews of Europe whom Hitler had set out to exterminate."⁴⁸ At least in the 1930s, then, it is likely that little would have changed if Coughlin's private dealings had been made public.

A counterargument concerning Coughlin's potential pro-fascist views is illustrated by another *Social Justice* article. In the very same issue that Coughlin or one of his contributors argued that the Jews were bringing oppression upon themselves in Italy, another author, again unnamed, protested that Nazis and communists were not subjected to the same ill treatment in the United States. "They wouldn't give the Nazis an exhibit at the World's Fair here," the article complains, "and perhaps that's all right—but the Communists got plenty, you may be sure, without anything being said about it."⁴⁹ Hardly a ringing endorsement, to be sure, and one could easily argue that the author of this piece was expressing more anti-communist sentiment than pro-fascist.⁵⁰ Perhaps, then, the charges of fascism against Coughlin are much the same: little more than a misinterpretation—albeit an understandable one—of strong anti-communist views. As Brinkley recounts:

⁴⁶ John Morton Blum, *V was for Victory: Politics and American Culture During World War II* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 147-148.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 149-152.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

⁴⁹ "Reds, But Not Nazis At Fair." *Social Justice*, March 27, 1939, vol. 3A, no. 13, p. 13.

⁵⁰ See Brinkley, 274.

Coughlin did indeed say...that America had been led to a “crossroads. One road leads to communism, the other to fascism.” And he apparently also said, when a reporter asked him which of the two roads he would choose, “I take the road to fascism.” What he meant, however...was only that he thought fascism a lesser evil than communism.⁵¹

Brinkley also notes that this was “an opinion with which many, perhaps most, Americans of the time would have agreed.”⁵² Though the “fascist” charge may never stick to him with absolute certainty, Coughlin was, if nothing else, most assuredly an unapologetic anti-communist.

The Christian Front, a stridently anti-communist organization with which Coughlin was unofficially but quite blatantly affiliated, also factors into public perception of Coughlin’s support for fascism. In an analysis of Sinclair Lewis’s *It Can’t Happen Here* in relation to what actually *did* happen in America, Christopher Vials names the Christian Front among “American fascist groups in the 1930s,” and given the group’s alleged actions, as described in *Social Justice*, it is not wholly a misnomer.⁵³ Coughlin, for his part, vacillated between tacit support and outright support for the group, before settling upon “outright.”

In the July 31, 1939 issue, an article credited to “Yours Truly” noted that the “militant Christian Front” was an “inevitable counteraction to Communism...a defense mechanism against Red activities and...a protector of Christianity and Americanism.”⁵⁴ Though no outright commendation was given, the overall tone of the article is undeniably positive. Letters to the editor also occasionally trended towards approval; one entitled “Wanted: a Christian Front” called for “some Christian method of organization” in order to enact Coughlin’s viewpoints in America.⁵⁵ And this call for militancy was certainly answered, in a way that compelled Coughlin

⁵¹ Brinkley, 274.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Christopher Vials, “What Can Happen Here?: Philip Roth, Sinclair Lewis, and the Lessons of Fascism in the American Liberal Imagination,” *Philip Roth Studies* 7, no. 1 (Spring 2011): 22. <https://www-jstor-org.unh.idm.oclc.org/stable/10.5703/philrothstud.7.1.9>.

⁵⁴ “Hosts Battle Communism in New York.” *Social Justice*, July 31, 1939, vol. 4A, no. 5, p. 3.

⁵⁵ “Wanted: a Christian Front.” *Social Justice*, March 4, 1940, vol. 5A, no. 10, p. 16.

to repeatedly defend himself. After the FBI seized weapons from members of the Christian Front in New York, Coughlin wrote, “Let all those who are interested in either organizing the Christian Front or joining it understand that I am neither the organizer nor the sponsor of the Christian Front, and moreover, that it is not becoming for me to identify myself with this organization or any other organization.”⁵⁶ Unbecoming, indeed: on the same page, another article, “U.S. Cracks Down on Christian Front,” notes that this wing of the group—according to the FBI—had “plotted,” among other things, “the overthrow of the United States Government.”⁵⁷ But despite his assertion that he could not be associated with the Christian Front, *Social Justice* adamantly defended the group. The front page of the following issue blared, “Christian Front Is No Foe of U.S.,” and called for a fair and open trial, arguing, “There must be no quiet dismissal after the damage of an anti-Christian ‘smear’ has been done.”⁵⁸ Opposition to the Christian Front, then, was opposition to Christianity itself; indeed, in a later issue’s call for donations, an again-unnamed author declared, “There are only two ‘fronts’: a Christian Front, and an anti-Christian Front.”⁵⁹

In a broadcast on January 21, 1940, Coughlin declared, “While I do not belong to any unit of the Christian Front, nevertheless, I do not disassociate myself from that movement. Therefore, I reaffirm every word which I have said in advocating its formation.”⁶⁰ He also cautioned the men involved in the movement to avoid Hitler’s example, saying, “Beware of falling into his evil ways of assuming to yourselves the interpretation of Christianity and its practices.”⁶¹ This is notable for two reasons: first, that Coughlin apparently anticipated that the

⁵⁶ “My Position Towards Organizations.” *Social Justice*, January 22, 1940, vol. 5A, no. 4, p. 3.

⁵⁷ Quoted in “U.S. Cracks Down On Christian Front.” *Social Justice*, January 22, 1940, vol. 5A, no. 4, p. 3.

⁵⁸ “Christian Front Is No Foe of U.S.” *Social Justice*, January 29, 1940, vol. 5A, no. 5, p. 1.

⁵⁹ “W-H-I-C-H?” *Social Justice*, February 12, 1940, vol. 5A, no. 7, p. 19.

⁶⁰ “I Take My Stand.” *Social Justice*, January 29, 1940, vol. 5A, no. 5, p. 4.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Christian Front would draw comparisons to Hitler's regime, and second, that he at the very least wanted it to appear that he had grown colder to Hitler and Nazism.⁶²

Indeed, he had ample reason to believe that outright embracement of Nazism would not be accepted by the masses. Beyond the pages of *Social Justice* and beyond Coughlin's broadcasts, events elsewhere had prompted response from Coughlin and note from the nation's newspapers. A March 1939 article from *The Tennessean* entitled "Honor Declined" begins, "They cheered the names of George Washington and Father Coughlin at the recent Nazi Bund rally in New York." And while the article's author posits that Washington cannot be assailed as Nazi-esque, "Coughlin has apparently been given cause to think...He is quick to refute the intimation that he is a Bundster at heart." Despite *Social Justice's* sometimes suggestive, sometimes almost glowing reviews of Hitler and his governmental policies, Coughlin was truly unwilling to directly state that he supported Nazism. Because he swiftly put down the suggestion that he supported America's Nazis, the article concludes, "Father Coughlin gives further proof that he wasn't born yesterday."⁶³ Given articles like this, it is no wonder that Coughlin was so quick to dismiss any such claims; it is clear that despite his followers, legion as they may have been at one time, at least some Americans would not have been quick to forgive a blatant statement of support for Nazis from a prominent radio broadcaster.

During the trial of the Christian Front men allegedly involved in the plot to overthrow the government, Coughlin said, "the opposition to Communism is on trial."⁶⁴ Bold words from a man who, just the previous week, had declined to be associated with the group. But the issue was

⁶² Coughlin understood that it would be to his advantage to keep contact with European dictators and their supporters under moderate wraps. Concerning the Mussolini episode, Warren writes, "By keeping the attempt at a 'Rome-Royal Oak Axis' a secret, Coughlin and his supporters were able to deny that the radio priest was a serious supporter of European fascism, but in identifying himself privately with its founder, he revealed what can only be called empathy with authoritarian rule." Warren, 110.

⁶³ "'Honor' Declined." *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), March 2, 1939.

⁶⁴ "I Take My Stand." *Social Justice*, January 29, 1940, vol. 5A, no. 5, p. 4.

not only anti-communism; Coughlin recognized that in addition to the charge of plotting government overthrow, the charge was also that the Christian Front “[stood] for anti-Semitism.”⁶⁵ Coughlin himself had been publicly charged with anti-Semitism on numerous occasions by the time of the alleged plot. There can be no disputing his anti-Semitism; from an early *Social Justice* column called “Searchlight on the Moneychangers” to much more sinister rants such as his *Kristallnacht* broadcast, it is obvious that he was anti-Semitic.⁶⁶

The Fascist Questions, Again

What can we conclude? Did Americans have cause to believe that Coughlin was actually a fascist? While it was unsatisfying to consider Brinkley’s assertion that “fascist” was a convenient word used only because there was nothing better, it is also unsatisfying to say that Coughlin was possibly but not certainly a fascist. Indeed, as Brinkley says, it is difficult to pin down a strict definition of fascism, and the word probably saw a wide variety of interpretations.⁶⁷ If there is no strict definition of fascism, the question is inherently impossible to answer unless someone publicly embraces the term. Though some certainly called him “fascist” at the time, it is only when one goes deeper into Coughlin’s dealings that a more definitive accusation of fascism can be made. The average American would have had cause to suspect, but no real proof of Coughlin’s true allegiance. Indeed, even today we cannot reliably call Coughlin a definite fascist—beyond Brinkley’s cautious denial, even Warren does not attempt to declare that he

⁶⁵ “I Take My Stand.” *Social Justice*, January 29, 1940, vol. 5A, no. 5, p. 4.

⁶⁶ This section was not included in every issue of *Social Justice*—far from it, actually—but it did appear in the very first issue. “Searchlight on the Moneychangers.” *Social Justice*, March 13, 1936, vol. 1, no. 1, p. 14-15.

⁶⁷ Brinkley, 282. For example, see Raymond Gram Swing, *Forerunners of American Fascism* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1935), 13: “Fascism is a word used by most of its enemies as a taunt. They mean by it the methods employed by European fascists after a revolution to consolidate their power and cut down their opponents.” Swing himself “[defines] it as a reorganization of society to maintain an unequal distribution of economic power by undemocratic means” (14).

certainly was a fascist. Calling Coughlin a “possible fascist” is, to be sure, far less snappy and far less appealing for a Wikipedia page than a definitive statement “for” or “against” would be, but it is more correct than a definitive statement.⁶⁸ But it cannot be ignored that Coughlin expressed views that were far from anti-fascist indeed. Certainly he was an anti-communist; that is plain to see from the very start. It is equally certain that he was anti-Semitic.

Jeansonne writes that Coughlin almost certainly “began the depression with some genuine sympathy for the poor, but those he loved were becoming overshadowed by those he wanted to destroy.”⁶⁹ Anti-communism—and, subsequently, anti-Semitism—overshadowed the rest of Coughlin’s message. Perhaps it is the case, as Brinkley argues, that Coughlin merely preferred fascism to communism, but as Coughlin is long dead, we may never be able to state with certainty whether or not he truly believed in fascism.⁷⁰

But the true question is not if Coughlin himself was actually a fascist: what actually matters is the reaction of Coughlin’s following, and what effect the fascist leanings and anti-Semitic rants had upon them.⁷¹ To Coughlin’s supporters, “fascist” and “Nazi” were not necessarily negative, if they even thought that these terms could or should be applied to him. But whether they supported or opposed him amid accusations of anti-Semitism, fascism, and demagoguery, Coughlin’s speeches influenced Americans to articulate their thoughts on these subjects in letters to the FCC. The nation’s response to Father Coughlin, both condemning and

⁶⁸ It’s inevitable that any high school student or college freshman in their first history class will head to Wikipedia before the library, so it’s instructive to consider what is written there, especially when considering perception of an individual. The article does not outright say, but certainly strongly suggests, that Coughlin was at the very least pro-fascist, if not fascist himself. Wikipedia, s.v. “Charles Coughlin,” last modified April 15, 2020, 15:07. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Coughlin.

⁶⁹ Jeansonne, 364.

⁷⁰ Brinkley, 274. See also Warren, 128: “Within American society, a major fault line was emerging that would become a focus for the radio priest. It divided Catholics and Jews. It was the choice between fascism and communism.”

⁷¹ “When Hitler came to power in March 1933, Coughlin’s taunts, perceived as unfortunate deviations, came to be taken more seriously. Suddenly words seemed capable of triggering violent persecution.” Warren, 135.

approving, sparked debates about freedom of speech, citizenship, and—perhaps above all—
about what it meant to be an American.

2. Father Coughlin on *Kristallnacht*: A Controversy

“Believe me, my friends, it is in all charity that I speak these words...”
-Father Charles Coughlin¹

“Unfortunately, Father Coughlin has uttered certain mistakes of fact.”
-Statement of Station WMCA²

In November 1938, Jews in Germany were subjected to a flood of hate crimes, which is certainly too weak a phrase to encompass the events that came to be known as *Kristallnacht*. Supposedly sparked by the assassination of a German embassy official in Paris by a Jewish teenager, *Kristallnacht* was a state-sponsored “destructive orgy” of property damage and death.³ Across the ocean, Americans took note. Historian Maria Mazzenga writes that “news of the persecution of the Jewish population had reached the U.S. before then, but *Kristallnacht*...marked an elevation in the level and organization of anti-Semitic violence in [Germany]”—one that was “widely and accurately reported in the United States.”⁴ An article in the *New York Times* of November 12th entitled “Nazis Defend Wave of Terror” noted that the German government did not spare a “word of condemnation or regret for the excesses themselves...”⁵ The *Times*, however, sharply condemned the crimes in a relay of the damning facts. “That wave destroyed almost all Jewish businesses, burned out most of the synagogues and

¹ Charles Coughlin, “Persecution—Jewish and Christian.” November 20, 1938. Printed in *Social Justice*, November 28, 1938, vol. 2A, no. 2, p. 4, 10-11.

² Quoted in “WMCA Contradicts Coughlin on Jews.” *New York Times* (New York, NY), November 21, 1938.

³ Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 154. Warren further notes that the assassinated official, Ernst vom Rath, was “ironically...under investigation by the Gestapo because of his opposition to anti-Semitism” (154).

⁴ Maria Mazzenga, “Condemning the Nazis’ *Kristallnacht*: Father Maurice Sheehy, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and the Dissent of Father Charles Coughlin,” *U.S. Catholic Historian* 26, no. 4 (Fall 2008), 72. <https://muse-jhu-edu.unh.idm.oclc.org/article/490632/pdf>.

⁵ Otto D. Tolischus, “Nazis Defend Wave of Terror.” *New York Times* (New York, NY), November 12, 1938.

landed thousands of Jews in jails and concentration camps, besides driving many to suicide.”⁶ The author then recounted, with thinly veiled derision, the official excuses given for the attacks. While perhaps not knowing the exact extent of the damage done to property and individual, Americans certainly had ample information to recognize that something truly horrible had transpired. Indeed, the *Times* was not alone: Donald Warren writes that “news of German atrocities soon resulted in a barrage of outraged messages from religious and civic groups across the United States.”⁷

But not everyone felt that outrage. For all but the most credulous of those listening to Father Coughlin’s speech of November 20, the Radio Priest’s stance could hardly have been clearer. Entitled “Persecution—Jewish and Christian,” Coughlin’s speech contained only the barest of pretenses of sympathy for the Jewish victims. Instead, Coughlin decried what he saw as a lack of sympathy for *Christian* victims of persecution elsewhere. After all, he told his audience, the Jews had brought this flurry of hatred and damage—physical and mental—upon themselves. Coughlin’s speech in the wake of *Kristallnacht* revealed the depths of his anti-Semitism to America, triggering protests and counter-protests in turn.

The editor of *Social Justice*, who might have been Coughlin himself, called Coughlin’s response to *Kristallnacht* “vital and timely.”⁸ Timely, perhaps: Coughlin’s speech followed the events of *Kristallnacht* by less than twenty days. But what was Coughlin’s “vital” contention concerning the violence? *Kristallnacht*, Coughlin explained to his American audience, was

⁶ Tolischus, “Nazis Defend Wave of Terror.”

⁷ Warren, 155.

⁸ “Persecution—Jewish and Christian.” Warren argues that Coughlin had a far, far greater say in what went into *Social Justice* than readers had cause to believe; Warren depicts Coughlin as the behind-the-scenes mastermind of the periodical, contending that situation permitting, Coughlin oversaw everything that went into the magazine, and perhaps wrote a number of the articles that were not contributed to him as well as the ones that were (250). If one takes Warren’s assertion into account, it is entirely possible that Coughlin himself was the one to refer to his own speech as “vital and timely.”

nothing more or less than a response to communism. Nazism itself, he argued, “was conceived as a political defense mechanism against Communism and was ushered into existence as a result of Communism.”⁹ And, he continued, Nazis focused on Jews with such vitriol because “Communism itself was regarded by the rising generation of Germans as a product not of Russia, but of a group of Jews who dominated the destinies of Russia.”¹⁰ Two elements are at play here: first, the aforementioned suggestion that the Jews were responsible for their own suffering, and second, the familiar anti-Semitic refrain of shadowy, looming Jewish conspiracy. Jews, Coughlin stated, had brought communism to the forefront. If Nazis responded with violence—well, then it was only a natural attempt to eradicate communism, the greater persecutor. “One persecution begets another as one injustice evolves into another,” he argued.¹¹ Communism itself was even a response to persecution: that of “the greed of the money changers, the exploiters, who persecuted and pilloried the teeming populations of Europe.”¹² Both outright and in subtext, Coughlin blamed Jews for the origin of Communism, and thus for their own suffering—and, one could argue, seems to paradoxically blame them for the situation that produced communism as well. Earlier in his speech, Coughlin had reminded his listeners that Jews were quite successful in certain realms—among them finance.¹³ He was likely referencing the Biblical story of Jesus chasing the money-changers from the temple; the majority of his listeners would presumably have been familiar with the story.

Coughlin asserted that “many historians—in fact, the vast majority of them— [maintained] that the Jews were persecuted because of their social philosophy.”¹⁴ So, the Jews

⁹ “Persecution—Jewish and Christian.”

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

were persecuted because they were communists—or because they created communism—and they were communists because Jewish “money-changers” had driven them to such an undesirable extreme. Coughlin then called upon America’s Jews to repudiate their communistic brethren: “It is our concern, therefore, to prevent a succession of disastrous effects.” He continued,

Therefore, I say to the good Jews of America, be not indulgent with the irreligious, atheistic Jews and gentiles who promote the cause of persecution in the land of the Communists...yes, be not lenient with your high financiers and politicians who assisted at the birth of the only political, social, and economic system in all civilization that adopted atheism as its religion...¹⁵

By “good Jews,” Coughlin doubtless meant anti-Communist Jews only. The inclusion of “gentiles” in this exhortation is on par with the “sympathy” contained in Coughlin’s speech—that is, as a pretext only, a means to refute charges of anti-Semitism. Indeed, Coughlin was clearly more concerned for other victims of persecution, whom he felt had not received the proper amount of recognition in international news—the kind that Jews in Germany were now receiving from American news agencies. It was only right, Coughlin argued, that victims of religious persecution in Russia, Mexico, and Spain received like attention in the American press.¹⁶ One can easily infer that he was speaking of persecution of Catholics and the wider Christian community in these countries. He specifically condemned the American press for what he saw as inadequate coverage of the oppression of Christians: “Alas! the news of Christian persecution came to our shores. Alas! the press and the radio were almost silent.”¹⁷

¹⁵ “Persecution—Jewish and Christian.” See also Warren, 156.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Few could have been surprised by the conclusion that Coughlin, the consummate anti-communist, would scorn communism, although they certainly could have been taken aback by the sheer depth of Coughlin's anti-Semitism on display. Mere days after *Kristallnacht*, *Social Justice* had ridiculed America for its preoccupation with Hitler when the real enemy was already on America's shores. Using Orson Welles's recent "Halloween prank, 'War of the Worlds,'" the periodical mockingly declared that the Martians were surely fascists, and derided Americans for their fear: "America's position is a dangerous one, what with Hitler on earth, and Mars on high. But there is hope, insiders believe. Perhaps Mars will send a million Octopus men to Germany to strangle Hitler! That will leave America safe for Wall Street and Joe Stalin."¹⁸ For Coughlin, communism—and in his mind, the Jews who propagated it—were the true enemy, not Hitler. Americans who protested were blind to the real threat. And in his anti-communist vein, *Social Justice* sometimes took an outright positive view of Hitler: he "had seen how the Communists made a ruin of Hungary...of Spain...of Germany's Bavaria...Hitler is the sworn foe of the destructive Reds," proclaimed one article. "He together with the magnificent co-operation of Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain of England are today untying the Gordian knot of the Central European problem."¹⁹ And a January 1938 article by the editor of the *Brooklyn Tablet* foreshadowed one of the main points of the controversial speech: "Of course, many are so dumb as not to see that Hitler, Mussolini and all other dictators are merely a reaction from the deeds of those who preach chaos and teach class war."²⁰ Those missionaries of chaos were communists as well as fascists; the article continues,

¹⁸ "Mars Threatens U.S. Democracy!" *Social Justice*, November 14, 1938, vol. 2A, no. 20, p. 12.

¹⁹ "The Week in the World: History Refutes Czech Propaganda." *Social Justice*, October 3, 1938, vol. 2A, no. 14, p. 14.

²⁰ Patrick Scanlan, "Stalin and Hitler in Secret Deal." *Social Justice*, January 24, 1938, vol. 5, no. 4, p. 7.

Communism thrives on social misery, Fascism thrives on social strife and the fear of class war. Abolish mass misery and you go a long way to abolish Communism, because you stifle class war and when you abolish class war and Communism you have gone a long way toward abolishing and preventing Fascism.²¹

Despite expressing disapproval of Hitler as well as Stalin, the article nevertheless comes to a similar conclusion that Coughlin would later relay in the *Kristallnacht* speech: that fascism is at least partly a reaction to communism—and furthermore, one that only the foolish would not foresee. Thus, the *Kristallnacht* speech was hardly out of character for Coughlin.

Surprise or no, Coughlin's speech roused its share of opponents. The head of New York station WMCA, Donald Flamm, did not take kindly to Coughlin's *Kristallnacht* speech, and Flamm's response sparked a new wave of protests—this time from Coughlin's supporters. WMCA had not been broadcasting Coughlin's speeches for long; the station became his New York City broadcaster only when his prior station, WOR, declined to do so any longer due to the religious content of his message.²² Flamm read Coughlin's *Kristallnacht* speech before it aired, and, in his telling, was aghast: "Yes, Father Coughlin added his voice of protest...but it was a protest that can best be likened to the oration of Marc Antony at the funeral of Julius Caesar."²³ Flamm agreed to air the speech anyway, but included warnings to the audience before and afterward, informing listeners that Coughlin's position was his own and not the station's and that the speech contained inaccuracies.²⁴ Coughlin was then informed that he would be required to submit his scripts in advance if he wanted to go on the air, and WMCA subsequently declined to broadcast him when he declined to submit to their supervision.²⁵ And Coughlin took note of the

²¹ Scanlan, "Stalin and Hitler in Secret Deal."

²² Warren, 158.

²³ Quoted in Warren, 158.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 158-159.

²⁵ David Goodman, "Before Hate Speech: Charles Coughlin, Free Speech and Listeners' Rights," *Patterns of Prejudice* 49, no. 3 (2015): 212. DOI: 10.1080/0031322X.2015.1048972. According to Warren, Flamm had

station's comments after the November 20th speech. Amid the transcription of the speech printed in *Social Justice* is a call to action:

Following Father Coughlin's Sunday broadcast "Persecution: Jewish and Christian," an organized drive of Communists and their sympathizers laid down a barrage of telephone calls, telegrams and letters to radio stations, asking them to please "do something about that wild fascist from Royal Oak." Today, you and your friends must write your local radio station DEMANDING THAT FATHER COUGHLIN BE KEPT ON THE AIR... Particularly you in New York, Brooklyn, and the neighboring territory. Did you hear what the announcer on station WMCA said following the broadcast last Sunday?²⁶

Those who listened very likely did hear WMCA's proclamation that Coughlin's speech was error-laden. Whether they approved of such a statement or not would determine their response.

Historian Charles Tull calls this "bizarre talk" "the most fantastic of [Coughlin's] controversial broadcasting career."²⁷ Warren refers to it as his "infamous Kristallnacht discourse."²⁸ What the harshest or most forgiving observer might call a condemnation of religious persecution in general can more plainly be read as an obviously anti-Semitic speech explaining and excusing the persecution of Jews in Germany. Indeed, historians have noted—as did Coughlin's contemporaries—that Coughlin used not only the Nazis' "logic" for the attacks but also the Nazis' information. Historian David Goodman writes, "In the broadcast Coughlin openly acknowledged the Nazi sources of his information; investigative reporter John Spivak noted that parts of the speech came 'almost word for word' from Nazi propaganda."²⁹ Likewise, Tull writes that not only did Coughlin "[express] full agreement with...Nazi theory," but also gave as evidence "the official Nazi list of Soviet officeholders."³⁰ Two such lists make it into the speech:

"consented to waive...[his] obligation to inspect [Coughlin's] talks in advance" prior to the *Kristallnacht* speech; he makes no comment as to why Flamm received a copy prior to the broadcast anyway (qtd. in Warren, 158).

²⁶ "Important." *Social Justice*, November 28, 1938, vol. 2A, no. 2, p. 8.

²⁷ Charles J. Tull, *Father Coughlin & The New Deal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965), 197, 198.

²⁸ Warren, 217.

²⁹ Goodman, 211.

³⁰ Tull, 197.

one, which purports to be a list of “quasi-cabinet members” in 1917, is comprised of three columns: assumed name, real name, and “nationality”—which is listed as either “Russian” or “Jewish.” Of twenty-five names on the list, only one is listed as “Russian” (Lenin himself), whereas the other twenty-four are listed as “Jewish.”³¹ This was meant to prove that the Bolsheviks were largely Jewish, and that the communistic Soviet Union could therefore be largely blamed upon the Jews (and Lenin). The other was “the central committee of the Communist Party operating in Russia,” and it “consisted of 59 members, among whom were 56 Jews, and...the three remaining non-Jews were married to Jewesses!”³²

The reasons for the controversy surrounding Coughlin’s radio broadcast of November 20, then, are threefold: first, that Coughlin used Nazi sources; second, that Coughlin sought to supplant attention to Jewish persecution with attention to what he implied was a worthier cause: the persecution of Christians; and third, the blatant anti-Semitism throughout, most insidiously in the suggestion that Germany’s Jews and other Jews throughout world history were responsible for their own suffering.³³ These offenses were accompanied by only the faintest of attempts at compassion. Even an acknowledgement that Jews had been persecuted in many European countries had to be extensively qualified:

Portugal and Spain, France and Germany, England and the northern countries, Italy and Russia—all, in turn, have taken their stand at the pillar of persecution to wield the leaden lash about the shoulders of Jews—for what reason I need not detail at the moment. I will satisfy myself simply by drawing to your attention that since the time of Christ, Jewish persecution only followed after Christians first were persecuted.³⁴

³¹ “Persecution—Jewish and Christian.” The transcription may indicate that this list is only present in printed copies of the speech and was not read over the radio (“The list published by Nazis and distributed throughout Germany will be published in the pamphlet, which I will gladly distribute to all who request a copy”).

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

Jews had, Coughlin admitted, indeed been persecuted in a multitude of countries, but any suffering they underwent had always been in response to—and, in his eyes, less important than—Christian suffering. And again, Coughlin sought to convince his listeners that the Jews were persecuted for reasons of their own making. Throughout the article, he coats his anti-Semitism and associated anti-communism with a thin sheen of insincere concern for the Jews of Europe, but at times, even that paltry concern vanishes: in his contention that the Jews were responsible for communism and for Nazism in turn; in his characterization of the Jews as a “closely woven minority in their racial tendencies,” among them “powerful...influence” and “an aggressiveness”; in his statement that some Jews—but only some, Coughlin was careful to concede—were “haters of God”; and, certainly, in his unapologetic use of Nazi talking points and propaganda.³⁵

Thus, it is plain to see why Tull characterized this speech as “fantastic.” The language Coughlin uses defies belief. Alan Brinkley wrote that “after 1938,” Coughlin became “one of the nation’s most notorious extremists,” because he was both “an outspoken anti-Semite” and “a rabid-anti-communist,” among other things.³⁶ Given the contents of his *Kristallnacht* speech, one can imagine why Brinkley named 1938 as a turning-point year. Of course, Coughlin was probably an anti-Semite long before he deigned to show it so thoroughly, but the *Kristallnacht* speech marks another turning point: for those Americans who were only partially introduced to Coughlin’s message, or who had no concrete opinion of the man, such a controversy could have solidified their opinion of Coughlin as anti-Semite. And, as Warren writes, “After Coughlin’s

³⁵ “Persecution—Jewish and Christian.”

³⁶ Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, & the Great Depression* (New York: Random House, 1982), x.

November 20 broadcast it was virtually impossible for Jewish leaders to suspend disbelief about Coughlin's intentions."³⁷ It was, so to speak, the smoking gun.

Response

"Ordinary" Americans did not ignore Coughlin's *Kristallnacht* speech. Some supported his point of view and some found it utterly repulsive. Many wrote to the FCC on the subject; those responses will be addressed in the next chapter. Two other forms of response also merit mention, however: first, the picketing of station WMCA by Coughlin's supporters, and second, journalist Dorothy Thompson's open letter to Frank McNinch, the chairman of the Federal Communications Commission.

The speech and negative responses to it had rather the opposite effect on some of Coughlin's supporters. Perhaps answering Coughlin's call to action in *Social Justice*, thousands of picketers parked themselves outside of WMCA in mid-December 1938, crying such things as "Down with Jews," "Jewish bankers barred Father Coughlin from the air," "Heil Hitler," and even "wait until Hitler comes over here."³⁸ Far from alone in his anti-Semitism, Coughlin could claim many allies among the American public. As "bizarre" as the speech may seem to us today, it nevertheless resonated with some, who looked to Coughlin for answers: for explanations of the communistic threat, or unrest owed to the Great Depression, or the looming European conflict.

Thompson's article "Abuse of Air? An Open Letter to Frank McNinch" also sought to address the controversy surrounding Coughlin's anti-Semitic remarks, somewhat akin to the way in which Donald Flamm and WMCA did. Originally established by the Radio Act of 1927 as the Federal Radio Commission, the FCC was established by the Communications Act of 1934 to

³⁷ Warren, 162.

³⁸ Qtd. in Warren, 165-166.

replace the FRC.³⁹ The FCC’s responsibilities included “regulating interstate and foreign commerce in communication by wire and radio so as to make available...a rapid, efficient, Nation-wide, and world-wide wire and radio communication service.”⁴⁰ The organization also handled, among other things, the licensing of radio stations.⁴¹ But the organization did not possess complete control of all things radio: as Section 326 of the Communications Act reads,

Nothing in this Act shall be understood or construed to give the Commission the power of censorship over the radio communications or signals transmitted by any radio station, and no regulation or condition shall be promulgated or fixed by the Commission which shall interfere with the right of free speech by means of radio communication.⁴²

The Communications Act, that is, limited the ability of the FCC to intervene in the dealings of individual radio stations.

Whereas Flamm could exercise control over what his station would and would not broadcast, Thompson called for McNinch to evaluate whether or not the FCC had the power to achieve the same end on a national scale, in spite of the limitations outlined in Section 326. “I am aware that the Federal Communications Commission is constrained and rightly so by the act which created it, from censorship,” wrote Thompson. “Nevertheless it issues or withholds its licenses to broadcasting networks on the basis of whether the radio is serving ‘the public interest, convenience, and necessity.’”⁴³ Thompson believed that Coughlin’s broadcasts did not follow

³⁹ Radio Act of 1927, Pub. Law 632, 69th Congress, February 23, 1927. Accessed April 16, 2020, <https://www.fcc.gov/document/radio-act-1927-established-federal-radio-commission>. First Annual Report of the Federal Communications Commission to the Congress of the United States for the Fiscal Year 1935. Accessed April 16, 2020, <https://www.fcc.gov/reports-research/reports/annual-reports-congress/1st-annual-report-congress-1935>.

⁴⁰ First Annual Report of the Federal Communications Commission to the Congress of the United States for the Fiscal Year 1935, 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁴² Communications Act of 1934, Pub. Law 73-416, 73rd Congress, Section 326 [47 U.S.C. 326] Censorship; Indecent Language. Accessed April 16, 2020 (<https://transition.fcc.gov/Reports/1934new.pdf>).

⁴³ Dorothy Thompson, “On the Record: Abuse of Air? Open Letter to Mr. McNinch.” *The Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), December 20, 1938.

this guideline, and she wanted McNinch to take action—any action, so that the matter might be put to some semblance of rest. “Do you believe that [Coughlin’s speeches] serve to ‘injure any racial, religious, or other group?’” she asked. “Whether you feel that they do or do not, you would be rendering a public service, first, to the broadcasting companies, and, second, to the American public, by making a ruling on the matter.”⁴⁴

But Thompson, a “widely read liberal daily columnist” who did not care to hide her opposition of Nazism, made it very clear which side of the matter she was on, and what course she hoped that McNinch would take.⁴⁵ She wrote that Coughlin delivered his speeches “in a style which is not unfamiliar to me, since I became acquainted with it some years ago when I was living in Germany.”⁴⁶ Thus, Thompson outlined three arguments against Coughlin in her article: first, that his speeches ought to be removed from the air because of their inherent prejudice; second, that it was within the power of the FCC to remove them; and third, that the Commission had precedent as it had taken action in somewhat similar cases. “The uttering on the radio of the words ‘damn’ and ‘hell’ awakened the sensibilities of the Federal Communications Commission,” she protested. “Does the Federal Communications Commission believe that these two words are more likely to offend or corrupt any part of the American public than the implications of some of Father Coughlin’s broadcasts?”⁴⁷ But above all, Thompson sought to reiterate to McNinch and to Americans across the country reading her column that she was ultimately calling for the FCC to investigate Coughlin’s speeches “from the viewpoint of whether or not what he has been saying is true.”⁴⁸ Like WMCA’s post-*Kristallnacht* speech

⁴⁴ Thompson, “On the Record: Abuse of Air? Open Letter to Mr. McNinch.”

⁴⁵ Warren, 244. Recounting an incident at a German-American Bund rally, he writes of a “Bund meeting...[that] became the stuff of journalistic legend. At one point, the rally was interrupted by nationally syndicated columnist Dorothy Thompson, who broke out laughing” and was subsequently “[removed] by Bund officials” (176).

⁴⁶ Thompson, “On the Record: Abuse of Air? Open Letter to Mr. McNinch.”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

statement that “Father Coughlin has uttered certain mistakes of fact,” Coughlin’s detractors were not only concerned with the anti-Semitism inherent in his speech, but also with the blatant falsehoods he presented as fact.⁴⁹

Thompson and those who thought similarly, and the picketers of WMCA and their like-minded fellows made up two sides of the Coughlin controversy. Was Coughlin a raging anti-Semite and liar? Or was he the only American speaking the truth? Was it the FCC’s duty to remove him from the air, or was it Coughlin’s right to be heard if he wished to speak and if Americans wished to hear him? In more than a thousand letters to the FCC, Americans would give their own answers to these questions.

⁴⁹ Qtd. in *New York Times*, “WMCA Contradicts Coughlin on Jews.” November 21, 1938.

3. Radio and Ruffians: Letters to the FCC

*“Song on Thanksgiving”
let us not wait
till it is too late
to halt the hymn of hate
Banish Coughlin from the air
Stop the Plot of Fascist snare
Save us Democracy Fair¹*

“I am only a man of the labor ranks and this is the first time I ever voiced my opinion...”²

In this section, I will examine Americans’ responses to Charles Coughlin, the demagogic Radio Priest, through their letters to the FCC and other individuals or organizations. What can these letters tell us about Americans in the Great Depression—about how they viewed Coughlin, their government, their radios, their rights? What, that is, did Americans believe in strongly enough to put pen to paper or fingers to typewriter to write to the fledgling Federal Communications Commission? Why did they believe they ought—or, indeed, had the right—to do so? Hundreds of Americans, men and women of all ages and backgrounds, wrote to express their opinions. In a sense, Americans held diametrically opposed beliefs: on one side, Americans argued that the FCC must force stations to carry Coughlin’s broadcasts because of the right to freedom of speech, or because they believed that he spoke the ultimate truth, or simply because they wanted to hear him; on the other side, Americans wrote that Coughlin must be removed from the air because of his racist, fascist, or otherwise unpalatable views and manner of speaking. But both sides tended to agree on at least some fundamentals: that they as Americans had a right to dictate what went on the air, that the FCC had an obligation to act in this situation,

¹ Letter from Lila Valda to the FCC, 24 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

² Letter from Mr. and Mrs. Roy E. Meyers to President Roosevelt, 23 July 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 201.

and, often, that their own opinion mattered—and that relaying that opinion to the government would make a difference.

Audience

Radio as a medium may not seem to readily lend itself to listener involvement. Many scholars examining the early history of the radio in America tackle the contemporary claim that radio was a passive, homogenizing activity.³ Some critics argued that radio, with its increasingly nationwide programs as well as its advertisements and the habits it inspired in everyday Americans, was contributing to the creation of a mass culture and a mass society—one America with one set of thoughts. They “charged [that it] encouraged passivity.”⁴ And it is easy to see why that claim could have appeared only too real, even imminent: on the surface, radio-listening is indeed passive. The listener need do nothing other than sit in his or her chair, or maybe wash her family’s laundry, or cook. Aside from choosing a program through the turn of a dial—or, perhaps, fixing one’s own radio set—radio listening required little active participation.⁵

But the reality of audience involvement in radio programs belies this potential for passivity. Audiences sometimes took an active interest in the programs on their radios in a literal sense; Kathy Newman points out that some took to boycotting a program’s sponsors as a form of activism, but Newman notes that boycotts were more often “threatened” than actually enacted.⁶ Rather, active participation often took the form of emotional investment in the program or

³ See, for example, Bruce Lenthall, *Radio’s America: The Great Depression and the Rise of Modern Mass Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 28 and Kathy M. Newman, *Radio Active: Advertising and Consumer Activism, 1935-1947* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 3.

⁴ Lenthall, 28.

⁵ Richard Butsch, “Crystal Sets and Scarf-Pin Radios: Gender, Technology, and the Construction of American Radio Listening in the 1920s,” *Media, Culture & Society* 20, no. 4 (October 1998), 566. <https://doi-org.unh.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/016344398020004003>.

⁶ Newman, 82.

characters. Scholars such as Bruce Lenthall address this investment in terms of intimacy. Such scholars often differentiate between two types of intimacy: identification with the characters of a particular program (or with that program itself), and belief that the individual as part of the audience was being addressed personally with the advertisement or program. A large part of this latter category has its counterpart in politics, specifically with President Roosevelt, although other political figures did make use of the radio in a similar way.⁷

The first category—identification with a character or program—is most often referenced in relation to women and soap operas. Lenthall relates a story from 1938 in which a mother, visiting her daughter in Washington, D.C., asks to be taken to see the apartment of Mary Marlin (a fictional character in soap opera *The Story of Mary Marlin*), much to her daughter's consternation.⁸ Though Lenthall notes that the mother knew, on some level, that Marlin was not a real woman, "Mary Marlin was not simply a fictional character [for her]. She was a friend who visited [the mother] in her home every day...[helping] her manage the connections between her private sphere and a world beyond..."⁹ Individuals deeply identified with the characters on shows, becoming personally attached to them beyond simple entertainment. It is not such a great stretch to extend this sort of relationship to Coughlin's broadcasts; he, too, could appear as the "friend" who entered the homes of his listeners every Sunday afternoon, delivering sermons in his unmistakable, rich voice. "An honest Presbyterian like me can recognize a great man when I hear him," wrote a Long Island woman in 1938.¹⁰

⁷ Lenthall, 94: "Roosevelt was hardly the only politicians seeking to connect personally with listeners through the air. Radio politicians of the 1930s did not all attempt to clone Roosevelt's style, but many did strive to build a sense of intimacy with their listeners." He mentions Huey Long as a prominent example.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Letter from Lucille Walcutt to the FCC, 27 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

Lacking access to these characters or real individuals in daily life, letter-writing was one of the most profound ways in which Americans actively participated in the radio programs that they enjoyed. Broadcasters sought listeners' letters, and many of these listeners wrote strategically.¹¹ Newman writes that "listeners wrote with a keen sense that their letters were more likely to be heeded if they mentioned the [sponsor's] products that they regularly purchased...[and] most letters were composed with the awareness that fan mail was carefully monitored by product sponsors."¹² That is, listeners recognized the importance of the sponsor to the radio broadcast; Lenthall writes that "listeners at times used their status as consumers to assert that their views should count in the vast world. Listeners suggested that program producers should pay particular attention to them because they used a sponsor's product."¹³ Newman agrees with this view; she writes that listeners heard "the silent question they imagined the sponsor to be asking: 'why should we care what you think?' 'Because we use your product,' was the answer implicit."¹⁴ The radio audience's argument, therefore, was that their voices deserved to be heard—and perhaps even obeyed—because they followed the broadcaster's decree and bought the sponsor's products. Their consumer tendencies, that is, should and sometimes did give them power. But Lenthall argues that this in turn gave consumer culture some of its power: "by locating their authority in their purchasing power, listeners accepted the new rules of consumerism."¹⁵ Radio audiences listened to the broadcasters and declared that their views had merit because of their purchasing power.

¹¹ "To encourage listeners to write, program managers organized contests, provided free offers of sponsored products, and aired special appeals to the audience." Elena Razlogova, *The Listener's Voice: Early Radio and the American Public* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 85.

¹² Newman, 131.

¹³ Lenthall, 64-65.

¹⁴ Newman, 133.

¹⁵ Lenthall, 65.

Coughlin's listeners, too, adhered to this line of thinking—especially those angry over the actions of stations such as WMCA, who took Coughlin off the air in 1938 after his controversial *Kristallnacht* broadcast. Some, in writing to the FCC, included threats of boycott: they recognized that some of their power as consumer came from their purchasing power. “If they continue [to deny Coughlin airtime] we shall notify each firm who broadcast [*sic*] on their chains that we will immediately start a boycott of their products,” wrote an angry listener.¹⁶ Newman writes that though large-scale boycotts over radio content were rare, they did occur: she uses as an example the workers’ boycott that led to the fall from grace of Boake Carter, a newscaster and “radio personality.”¹⁷ These workers—union men of Philco radios—organized a boycott of the product that they themselves made, because they felt that Carter reflected poorly on their work through his constant disdain of the CIO and specifically its leader, John L. Lewis.¹⁸ “The CIO counseled union members to use their voice in a manner in which the radio industry could not ignore. The [CIO Radio] handbook constantly prodded its readers to consider their rights: ‘Remember, the air waves belong to the people.’”¹⁹ “The airwaves did belong to the people,” Newman concludes, “but it was only in rare instances that people expressed their sense of ownership through the tactic of the boycott.”²⁰ Despite its rarity, in the case of Carter and the CIO, boycott was undeniably effective. A leap to sharing their opinions with the government is not unthinkable, especially coupled with the sense of entitlement that some took from their status as citizen, taxpayer, or listener.

¹⁶ Marie Ballene to Commissioner of Broadcasting, 22 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

¹⁷ Newman, 87.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 106.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

1938: WMCA, Dorothy Thompson, and Fear

In 1938, letters to the FCC about Charles Coughlin saw a sudden upswing. Though the National Archives may not possess all the letters written to the FCC, the disparity between letters sent in 1937 and in 1938 is extreme. Whereas the archive offered five letters for 1937, there were 963 letters for 1938. 1939 saw the next highest number of letters at 370; in all other years from 1931 to 1946, the archives have anywhere from zero to 45 letters. What, then, can account for such an intense increase between 1937 and 1938?

Three events in particular helped to spark this increase.²¹ First, journalist and “nationally syndicated columnist” Dorothy Thompson’s open letter, written in late 1938 to Commissioner Frank McNinch, questioned the suitability of Coughlin’s program for the radio and whether or not his broadcasts violated FCC policy.²² She believed that they did, and that McNinch ought to respond, or at the very least investigate.²³ Americans reacted in droves. Some wrote to the FCC in outrage, arguing that Thompson’s letter was flawed, inept, and not worth reading. Others argued that McNinch ought to listen to Thompson and take her advice. Others simply sought to bring the article to McNinch’s attention; many cut it from their newspapers and included it with their letters.²⁴ Of my sample of 318 letters, 25 mentioned Thompson. This number is far less than I expected it to be; perhaps a greater number of letters concerning Thompson were coincidentally passed over by my selection method. Nevertheless, Thompson’s article still represents a

²¹ Goodman also notes *Kristallnacht*, WMCA’s response, and Thompson’s article as momentous, though he devotes more time to the *Kristallnacht* speech and WMCA’s response than to Thompson. David Goodman, “Before Hate Speech: Charles Coughlin, Free Speech and Listeners’ Rights,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 49, no. 3 (2015): 199–224. DOI: 10.1080/0031322X.2015.1048972

²² Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 176.

²³ Dorothy Thompson, “On the Record: Abuse of Air? Open Letter to Mr. McNinch.” *The Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), December 20, 1938.

²⁴ The title of the newspaper from which senders took Thompson’s article was usually not included in the clipping; however, in my own research, I have found it in *The Washington Post* and *The Indianapolis Star*, among others.

significant event of 1938. After all, in an era before an easy Google search can tell you the governmental agency you're looking for and who runs it, it is not unthinkable to imagine that some Americans learned, if not of the FCC, then at least of Commissioner McNinch, from Thompson's article. As a method of raising awareness, it could have been very effective.

Of course, not all of the letters were addressed to the FCC correctly or at all; one, for example, was addressed to "Mr. Minch."²⁵ Many wrote to the Federal Communications Bureau, the Radio Commission of America, and other such agencies.²⁶ But the majority of letters were addressed to McNinch or the Federal Communications Commission; 147 were addressed specifically to McNinch, and 84 to the FCC more broadly. Another 15 were addressed to the Federal Radio Commission, the precursor to the FCC. Clearly, these Americans knew McNinch's name and knew enough about the government agency to address the letter to him. It is not unreasonable to think that Thompson's open letter may have had an influence.

Those who chose to write to the FCC about Thompson professed a variety of opinions. Certainly, not everyone agreed with her open letter. "I am not a renowned newspaper columnist nor a famous radio commentator," began one detractor, John Schwab of Rochester, New York. "But I am a patriotic American citizen who believes that Dorothy Thompson's letter...is a one-sided, biased argument for the defeating of the fundamental American principle of Free Speech."²⁷ Schwab argued that Americans must not be afraid to utilize their right of free speech, and Thompson only sought to "intimidate the Stations into discontinuing Father Coughlin's broadcasts...Miss Thompson advocates a subtle manner in which the fundamental principle of

²⁵ Letter from Harry Royal to Frank McNinch, 23 February 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

²⁶ Many of these exist, but Letter from Mrs. Jack E. Gould to Federal Radio Commission, received 28 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202, and Letter from Eugene R. Smolens to Radio Commission of America, 29 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202 provide two examples.

²⁷ Letter from John H. Schwab to Frank McNinch, 20 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

Free Speech, which is guaranteed to all Americans, be relegated to the junk heap.”²⁸ And the defense of free speech was more valuable than any one man: “A fine state of affairs when Americans are confronted by this spectre lurking in our midst! Don’t you think that the principle of Free Speech for all Americans is too dangerous a subject to intimidate? Don’t you think that the enemies of this Democracy would delight [in that]?”²⁹ To do what Thompson requested, in Schwab’s eyes, would be to give into America’s enemies, who would be thrilled to see the great democracy tumble from within.

Thompson could count supporters among the letter-writers as well. “Have you seen the enclosed clipping?” wrote Rita Schenkman of Jackson Hills, New York. “Won’t you please do as Dorothy Thompson suggests? Won’t you please do your share toward helping to spread ‘Peace on earth, good will to men’? Won’t you please do your share to keep out Nazi propaganda...?” In Schenkman’s view, Thompson opposed Coughlin not out of a desire to curtail American free speech, but to prevent stations from broadcasting Coughlin’s inflammatory, Nazi-esque statements across the country. And Schenkman believed it a matter of the utmost importance; she closed her letter with the plea, “For God’s sake—and this is no blasphemy—help us.”³⁰ One letter-writer also sought to bring Thompson’s article to the attention of another: the president. “I am in favor of the sentiments in the enclosed columns of Dorothy Thompson...with reference [to] Father Coughlin...P.S. I am in favor of your running for a third term.”³¹

The decision of WMCA and other stations such as WDAS of Philadelphia to first require that Coughlin submit his scripts in advance, and then to outright ban him from broadcasting over

²⁸ Letter from John H. Schwab to Frank McNinch, 20 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Letter from Rita Schenkman to Frank McNinch, 27 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

³¹ Letter from Max Hindle to President Roosevelt, 27 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

their stations, also sparked an increase in letters. Of the sample of 318, 115 of the letters mentioned WMCA—much more significant than the number of letters referencing Dorothy Thompson. This is at least partially because the majority of the letters came from people living in and around New York City, the area that WMCA served. People alternately praised WMCA for its actions and decried it as un-American. Many called for its license to be revoked or to not be renewed. One writer expressed his outrage that WMCA had dared to require Coughlin to submit his scripts in advance; “imagine my amasement [*sic*],” he continued,

when one week later I hear over your station the announcement that you intended to set yourselves up as public censors and would not permit Fr. Coughlin to speak; firstly, because he had refused to submit his script in advance and secondly, because you refused to broadcast any material which would “stir up religious and racial strife and dissension in America”. This off-hand statement of yours, unsupported by facts, is dastardly.³²

In a way, this writer turned WMCA’s declaration that Coughlin had mixed up his facts back on them; to him, it was WMCA who had not done its research. Another called on President Roosevelt to intervene, writing that he should “direct WMCA to allow Father Coughlin to use the air without restriction.”³³

Others applauded WMCA, though; a writer from New York City derided “the disgraceful discourses of Father Charles Coughlin” and approvingly noted that “station WMCA has had the courage to cut him off.”³⁴ H. Stuart Klopper of Brooklyn wrote directly to WMCA, remarking that though he was “inclined to be vehemently opposed to any action...which would in any way censor or even curtail the right to free speech,” he recognized that “there are times when

³² Letter from Peter McCabe to Station WMCA, 29 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

³³ Letter from I.J. Bellafiore to President Roosevelt, 27 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

³⁴ Letter from B.E. Paneth to Frank McNinch, 27 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

reasonable regulations may be imposed to guide the free exercise of that right to avoid its abuse.” And he clearly believed that WMCA was on the right side of this debate: “Your station in this regard has done far more to preserve the right of free speech than to destroy it.”³⁵ This letter perfectly illustrates Goodman’s argument that though “many ordinary 1930s Americans embraced the view that freedom of speech was a civil right,” some nevertheless argued that “protection from exposure to hateful speech was also a right” that the American government ought to enforce.³⁶ Thus, though Americans in the 1930s recognized their right to free speech, some were also beginning to call for what they viewed as “reasonable regulations,” as Klopper put it, to that right.³⁷ Goodman further notes that common access to the radio prompted more discussions of freedom of speech in American homes than would have occurred otherwise.³⁸

Lastly, though it is rarely explicitly mentioned in the letters, a less pronounced cause of the writing uptick was global instability, and perhaps also Coughlin’s ever-increasing anti-Semitism. Americans recognized that another World War might be on the horizon, and the world was not short of crises even before it broke out. Understandably motivated by fear of another overwhelmingly costly conflict, some saw Coughlin as doing his best to prevent it: “I can’t sit back and let the war-lovers get us in another war,” wrote Francis Hogan of St. Louis. “Father Coughlin has done a lot to keep us out of war so far and may he continue in his good work.”³⁹ Other writers saw Coughlin as possibly exacerbating the turmoil in Europe: “We naturally read with great distress and sorrow the events going on in Europe and feel that Father Coughlin’s

³⁵ Letter from H. Stuart Klopper to Station WMCA, received 21 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

³⁶ Goodman, 202.

³⁷ Letter from H. Stuart Klopper to Station WMCA, received 21 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200. Goodman writes, “Ordinary Americans in the 1930s were more ready than judges and legislators to argue, albeit in tentative and partial ways, that psychological and emotional harm should be sufficient reason to ban hateful speech” (201).

³⁸ Goodman, 201.

³⁹ Letter from Francis E. Hogan to the FCC, 10 October 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

speech at a time like this, when we need more understanding and brotherhood, could only have the effect of creating...intolerance,”⁴⁰ wrote a woman from New York City. “In the eyes of this holy priest, the loyalist [of Spain] should be exterminated by his three honorable pals Hitler, Mussolini, Franco and of course if we Americans comply with Father Coughlins [*sic*] wishes this could be accomplished so much sooner,” wrote another woman. Her letter ends with a postscript and a plea: “Follow the golden rule Do unto others as others have done unto us. In 1775 we to [*sic*] called for help, and we won because France answered our call. Let us do the same for Spain.”⁴¹

Another writer opined that much of the European conflict could be traced back to the Pope: Coughlin was “the mouthpiece of the Pope of Rome...the Pope was the cause of all the trouble in Ethiopia, Span [*sic*], Egypt, Ireland, Germany, and many other places.” But this writer believed it too late to prevent more conflict: “I think it would be Best to Prepare the U.S. For a great War,” he advised the President. “With Plenty of Food and War Munitions, Raise all the Grain and Food you can Convenient. Even Now The U.S. Should have several Storehouses In the Mountains Filled with Food, Munitions and Planes.” This advice to President Roosevelt was, as the letter-writer scrawled in pencil under the typed message, “A Friendly Tip.”⁴² Coughlin’s listeners clearly saw conflict looming. Some saw Coughlin as their anti-war champion, while others believed him to be worsening tensions.

On specifically religious grounds, some Catholics chafed at what they perceived as the overemphasis of the Jewish plight in Europe and the underemphasis of Catholic persecution. One

⁴⁰ Letter from R. Sheinborg to Frank McNinch, 30 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

⁴¹ Letter from Mrs. McGrath to Senator Robert Wagner, 13 January 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

⁴² Letter from George W. Gordon to President Roosevelt, 8 May 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 201.

writer argued in a letter to President Roosevelt that Coughlin had done nothing but bring to light that “you, as President, have never done anything to help persecuted Catholics abroad but are now helping less violently persecuted Jews in Germany.”⁴³ Another writer agreed that the President focused too much upon Jewish affairs outside of America (and within America, too), arguing to McNinch that Roosevelt had been “goaded to take such important steps in the affairs of other countries [that] the American people (excluding the Jews) feel are detrimental to America...we have enough worries here without creating breaches abroad.” The writer concluded, “We, non-Jews, are sick of the whole situation. Our sympathies no longer go out to the persecuted—if such they be.”⁴⁴ The letter was only signed with “An American”—unusual enough for letters to the FCC. Most letters were signed with the writer’s name—presumably their real name and real address, as the FCC did reply to letters, even if only with toothless, boilerplate responses. An FCC employee—perhaps a secretary or mail worker—wrote “no address” on those letters without a return address, so letters without addresses were at the very least noted.⁴⁵ The signature of “An American” is reminiscent of the letters to the editor of *Social Justice*, which were often signed similarly, or only signed with initials. It is entirely possible that this is because, as Warren suggests, Coughlin made up the majority of these letters himself. Or, it is possible that those who chose to write to the FCC actually wanted a response from the government agency—some said as much in their letters—and put their real name and address for that reason. Or, if any of the letters to the editor were in fact real, perhaps those writers did not

⁴³ Letter from I.J. Bellafiore to President Roosevelt, 27 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

⁴⁴ Letter from “An American” to Frank McNinch, 29 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

⁴⁵ Letter from R. Aimes to Frank McNinch, 20 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

wish to have their real name attached to such sentiment, and writers to the FCC, confident that their letters would not be published in a magazine, had no such compunctions.

Themes: Citizenship and Military Service

Writers frequently drew attention to their status as American citizens; indeed, these Coughlin devotees and detractors were often unsatisfied with simply calling themselves “Americans”: they were, very specifically, American citizens. For example, the secretary of the organization “Friends of Father Coughlin” wrote, “Our organization is composed of American Citizens of all creeds, who are interested in free speech and equal rights for all.”⁴⁶ In this instance, these American Citizens were interested in protesting the decision of some stations to remove Coughlin from the air, and they drew that power of protest at least partially from their citizenship. Many letter-writers clearly held citizenship in high regard and felt the need to draw attention to it—perhaps merely out of pride, but certainly sometimes out of the belief that citizenship came with privileges as well as responsibilities. “Every American Citizen has the right to freedom of speech anywhere in the United States,” argued a Coughlin supporter. “The denial of freedom of speech by...WMCA is an insult to every American citizen...As an American citizen I request that the license of station WMCA be immediately revoked.”⁴⁷ Coughlin’s detractors also used this argument: “We demand as citizens and taxpayers of the United States that Father Coughlin be not permitted to speak again on the air,” wrote one such opponent.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Letter from William J. Butterly, Secretary of Friends of Father Coughlin to the FCC, 13 October 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

⁴⁷ Letter from Richard F. Morse to the FCC, 12 January 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

⁴⁸ Letter from Mrs. L. Brin, Mrs. R. Karon, M. I. Karon, and Mollie [illegible] to the FCC, 1 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

Writers also placed value on their status as war veterans. “In as much as I am a true American (a world war veteran) I am asking that you bar Father Coughlin from the air on grounds that his talks are UnAmerican and do a great deal of harm to our present form of government,” wrote a resident of Waterloo, Iowa.⁴⁹ He explicitly states that he is truly American because he has served his country, and perhaps draws his certainty that Coughlin is detrimental from this experience. Furthermore, he is a “true American” because he is a veteran of World War I, and not because he is a citizen, as many of the letters declare. “I, the undersigned an American citizen—a world war veteran (# of discharge papers 2,934,226) and I was glad to serve in the United States army because I have found a haven of refuge under the American flag,” begins another such letter. “And now listening to the tales of Father Coughlin on the radio it takes me back to Russia of the Czars—where the priests done the Jew-Baiting from the pulpit...so therefore I insist that you take action to remove Father Coughlin of [*sic*] the air—this will be an ‘American Deed.’”⁵⁰ This letter-writer, believing that the course of action he “insists” upon will be aided by his status as a veteran of World War I, even thought to include the number of his discharge papers—perhaps in case the FCC decided to fact-check his claim. Furthermore, he suggests that he is a Russian immigrant who has “found a haven of refuge under the American flag.” His letter argues that he has seen Russia go down an inadvisable path and does not want the same for his new haven, America—in fact, removing Father Coughlin would be an “American Deed.” This is but one example of a common theme throughout the letters: a varying perception of America, of what it means to be American, of what exactly constitutes an “American Deed.”

⁴⁹ Letter from Ira J. Cherry to the Radio Commission, 1 October 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

⁵⁰ Letter from A. Henkin to the FCC, 29 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

Another veteran of a similar mind argued that the values he had fought to uphold in World War I necessitated action: “I am a good American and my blood was spilled on the battle fields of France fighting for Democracy and I am not going to stand by without protesting for a Great Christian leader like Father Coughlin.”⁵¹ This man saw the battles that he had fought in France as continuing on home turf; Americans still needed to fight to uphold democracy, even if that meant that his weapon was now a pen instead of a gun. To this veteran, his duty as champion of democracy extended to arguing for what he saw as Constitutional rights; indeed, he wrote, “I believe by denying Father Coughlin the American right to speak is denying free speech.”⁵² In this man’s eyes, the “American Deed” is not keeping Coughlin off the air, but allowing him to speak via whatever station he wished to. To do otherwise would be to deny him a right cherished by Americans.

One letter makes it clear that some believed status as a veteran afforded one a greater right to have one’s opinion heard: “Who fought the Revolutionary War?” wrote two women from Holyoke, MA. “Not the Jews. The War of 1812? Not the Jews. The Jews might have fought the World War but—because they were conscripted that’s why.”⁵³ From this letter, one can infer that these women believed Jews to be behind the “plot” to remove Father Coughlin from the air, and their rebuttal is that the Jews should not have a say, because they did not fight in some of America’s greatest conflicts—and when they did, it was because they were conscripted, not because of any deep-seated patriotism. Beyond the blatant anti-Semitism of this sentiment, it is clear that many Americans believed that status as a veteran held great importance.

⁵¹ Letter from James J. Grimes to Frank McNinch, 4 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Letter from Mrs. Ellen J. Mills and Mrs. Arthur Gloster to Frank McNinch, 28 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

Freedom of Speech and “Listeners’ Rights”⁵⁴

One of the most profound privileges recognized in these letters is that of freedom of speech, but writers frequently expressed their understandings of the privileges of citizenship in terms of “being” American. “I urge you to...command W.M.C.A + the other stations to cease discriminating against the most American American in the U.S.A.,” wrote one.⁵⁵ Some even questioned whether the Founding Fathers would recognize the America they saw in the wake of Father Coughlin’s removal: “I often wonder,” wrote a listener from Jackson Heights, New York, “if Our Dearly Beloved Washington arises from his tomb in Mount Vernon and looks out over the city bearing his name and says, ‘Is this my beloved Country that sacrificed so much for and established profound Freedom of Religion, Thruth [*sic*] and Liberty for All.’”⁵⁶ But some also declared another privilege theirs: some letter-writers argued that their letters must be answered because public servants were accountable to them as taxpayers. In response to what she deemed an unsatisfying reply to her first inquiry, Marie Piesinger wrote:

Your letter of Jan 3rd, acknowledging my letter received. But you only acknowledged it, you did not ANSWER it. You are a public official and I am a tax-payer. I have a right to ask you questions on a subject which I wish to be informed on and I have a right to demand a reply. To save you the trouble of digging up my letter out of the thousands you must have received—judging from the circular form used—I will repeat my question. “Why was Father Charles E. Coughlin refused the use of the three large radio chains for his broadcasts?”⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Goodman’s article provides an excellent analysis of Americans’ ideas about freedom of speech in the context of letters to the FCC. He writes, “What is striking, when viewed in the larger context of free speech history, is the extent to which listeners—both pro- and anti-Coughlin—formulated arguments in terms of rights, while anti-Coughlin listeners in addition ventured arguments about harm” (213).

⁵⁵ Letter from Charles F. Mazad to the FCC, 30 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202. Given the preoccupation of some pro-Coughlinites with native-born Americanism, it is interesting to see the moniker “the most American American” applied to a Canadian-American.

⁵⁶ Letter from P. Courtney to the FCC, 28 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

⁵⁷ Letter from Marie A. Piesinger to the FCC, 6 January 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

Admittedly, the FCC certainly did use a number of canned replies, rarely writing responses actually tailored to individual letters. Piesinger probably received a reply of little more than a few lines recognizing receipt of a letter. Perhaps more interesting, however, is Piesinger's declaration that she has a right to ask questions about whatever she wishes and expect an answer—because she pays taxes. As we have seen, letters to the FCC couched their demands or requests or recommendations in a variety of terms: citizenship, Americanism, tax-paying, status as a veteran, and others. Many of these involve obligation—in a number of forms. Piesinger's letter, as others, argues that the FCC has an obligation to her because she is a taxpayer. Other letters, such as the ones argued in terms of citizenship, saw the FCC's obligation as one to uphold the Constitution, or Coughlin's rights as an American citizen. That is, they viewed the tasks they demanded of the FCC as the agency's duty.

The status of radio as public service also played a role in Americans' understanding of their rights as listeners.⁵⁸ Some of Coughlin's listeners sought to sway the FCC by insisting that the airwaves were not fully under governmental or station purview, because they belonged to Americans themselves, and service providers had little right to dictate what could or could not be broadcast. Wrote Frank McGlenchey of Philadelphia,

Regarding the recent action of certain radio outlets in refusing time on the airways to the Rev Chas Coughlin which I deem most unfair, considering the fact that tho the respective stations may be their [*sic*] own property never the less the airways of America do not belong to them, but rather to all of the people and I as an American justly protest such censorship regardless who the person may be.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Goodman, 214: "To posit a right to broadcast as opposed to a right to speak was a considerable leap, but it was one that many Coughlin supporters made, drawing on the then common populist idea that broadcasting should be a public utility." He also notes, however, that "this populist idea" was "firmly rejected by the industry and regulators alike as simply impractical." Nevertheless, as these letters and Goodman's numerous like examples illustrate, the rejection of the idea as impractical did not mean that Americans abandoned their conception of radio as public utility.

⁵⁹ Letter from Frank McGlenchey to the FCC, 15 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

Listeners argued that they, not corporations or the government, had the right to decide what they would hear over the radio. Another writer openly questioned broadcasters by challenging what he believed to be their unjustly claimed ownership of the radio; Coughlin's removal was "a violation of our rights of freedom of speech. Who controls the air? Certainly not the Nat'l Assoc of Broadcasters or the C.B.S. It belongs to each one of us for our use."⁶⁰

And, as Bruce Lenthall points out, President Roosevelt's Fireside Chats (as well as the programs of other politicians) inspired at least a feeling of involvement in politics for Americans, if not actual involvement. This involvement was a new development; before the Fireside Chats, Lenthall argues, the average American may have felt a distance from politics that Roosevelt's congenial programs helped to bridge.⁶¹ With assurance from broadcasters that their letters were welcomed and a newfound sense of involvement in the political system, it is no wonder that some readily offered their opinions, or even that some sought to demand this or that from a government agency. They believed that it was their right—if not as taxpayer or as citizen, then at least as radio listener. This sentiment, then, may account at least in part for the letters sent to President Roosevelt concerning the Radio Priest.

Free speech held a variety of meanings for these Americans, and those who supported Coughlin and those who did not disagreed about essentials. His supporters argued that if Coughlin wanted to speak, he had a right to be heard, regardless of the content of his message; many detractors argued that because of the speeches' prejudiced content, they were not protected by free speech and were therefore subject to censorship.⁶² For some, WMCA's denial of airtime

⁶⁰ Letter from Arthur J. Nouti to the FCC, received 18 October 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

⁶¹ Lenthall, 96, 107.

⁶² Goodman outlines this excellently; he writes, "Coughlin's opponents...[argued]...that his speech was *so* destructive or hurtful that it should not be allowed on air" (218). On the other hand, those who supported him "alleged that stations refusing to sell him time had violated his listeners' civil right to hear him" as well as "Coughlin's right to speak" (214).

to Father Coughlin following the clash over prior submission of a script amounted to blatant violation of the First Amendment. “One of the fundamental rights as I have been told, is the right of free speech. In the ‘muzzling’ of Father Coughlin I fail to see this right exercised,” wrote H. Schmidt of Long Island.⁶³ “Father Coughlin MUST be permitted to speak freely when he so deems it expedient,” wrote Harold Wightman, the secretary of Rockaway Beach’s Holy Name Society. “Many others have been granted this right of free speech, only to have the VERY FOUNDATION of the AMERICAN GOVERNMENT threatened to DESTRUCTION”—surely a reference to American communists, whose radio broadcasts provide a sore spot throughout many Coughlin supporters’ letters.⁶⁴ In this campaign to decry what they perceived as a violation of Father Coughlin’s free speech as an American citizen, his supporters frequently aimed their vitriol directly at WMCA, calling for the revocation of its license to broadcast, or promising to boycott WMCA and other stations’ sponsors until they reversed their decision.⁶⁵ Indeed, just over a third of the 1938 letters mention WMCA.

Anti-Semitism

Coughlin’s anti-Semitism was abundantly clear in his *Kristallnacht* speech, and there was a great deal of prejudice to be found elsewhere. *Social Justice* was likewise anti-Semitic: for example, as historian Charles Tull notes, with his publication of the spurious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, “Coughlin squarely aligned himself with the leading Jew-baiters of the day.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Letter from H. Schmidt to the FCC, 30 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

⁶⁴ Letter from Harold Wightman, Secretary of the Holy Name Society of St. Camillus Church, 16 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

⁶⁵ Letter from F.H. Rippe to the FCC, received 18 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203. This is a form letter to which Rippe added his or her own comments and emphasis in the form of underlining words and phrases; the text concludes, “THE ENEMIES OF CHRISTIANITY ARE ORGANIZED TO DESTROY AMERICA/ALL AMERICAN PATRIOTS MUST UNITE NOW IN PRESERVING AMERICA.”

⁶⁶ Charles J. Tull, *Father Coughlin & The New Deal* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965), 193; “In 1938...*Social Justice* began serializing excerpts from the fraudulent *Protocols*” (Goodman, 211).

Letters to the FCC on the subject of Judaism and Jews are, as with many other topics, divided between the “fors” and the “againsts,” with Coughlin’s supporters ignoring, excusing, or duplicating his anti-Semitism, and his detractors protesting against the allowance of prejudice on the air.

Not all of the letters supporting Coughlin contained blatant anti-Semitic language or ideas, but many certainly did. “Since when do the Jews of this country censor the white man? We are fed up on their lies and their cheap propaganda,” wrote a couple from West Los Angeles.⁶⁷ Other letters echoed the common conflation of Judaism and communism: “Everyone knows the Jews support Communism here and abroad. They have never denied it!...The Jews would have done themselves a favor if they had just kept their mouths closed but as we know from the furore [*sic*] in the newspapers and on the Radio these last few weeks they are most adept at shouting.”⁶⁸ Coughlin repeatedly shifted the blame for Jewish persecution from persecutors to the Jews themselves. As a Long Island man proclaimed, “If Father’s words seem a little strong, don’t blame him—blame the rascals who make such broadcasts necessary by reason of their social and moral misconduct!”⁶⁹ One letter-writer, whose three-page missive is mostly capitalized, even took time away from condemning the censorship of Coughlin to decry what he saw as undue Jewish influence in clothing: “The Jews have educated our public to accept short time flimsy material attire, to make living increase in expense, to have style be simply be [*sic*] trashy material and devoid of common generally spread taste, no distinction or workmanship, simply that which is worth less...”⁷⁰ Clearly, Coughlin’s listeners felt free to share anti-Semitic

⁶⁷ Letter from Mr. and Mrs. McKevet to Frank McNinch, 30 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

⁶⁸ Letter from Mrs. H. Alchorn to Frank McNinch, received 30 November 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 202.

⁶⁹ Letter from Hugh J. McCabe, Jr. to Frank McNinch, 18 January 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

⁷⁰ Letter from Harrison Randolph to the FCC, 21 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

sentiments openly, if such a statement can be made about writing to the government with what was presumably one's own name and address. Others, however, instead denied Coughlin's anti-Semitism altogether: "I fail to see where he stirs up religious strife or class hatred," wrote one listener. Rather, he was merely "asking of the Jews the same cooperation that the Jews are asking of Christians."⁷¹

Those condemning anti-Semitism also sought to share their point of view with the FCC.

As a Jewish man from Newark, New Jersey wrote,

As an American citizen I protest most vigorously the use of radio to stir up anti-semitism. Shall my children, because they are of Jewish faith, be subjected to the horrors and humiliations of anti-semitism because men like Coughlin are permitted to spread poisonous doctrines unchecked[?]⁷²

Another Jewish man wrote to President Roosevelt, "I beg you to do something about our American Hitler...for disturbing the peace of our nation by spreading hate and antisemitism." His reasoning was also personal, although instead of wishing to protect his children, this writer wished to protect his wife: "Every time on Sunday at 4 a clock when the time comes for our Nazi Coughlin to talk she gets sick and have to call a doctor...I only hope nothing worse happens [sic]."⁷³ Many of the letters protesting perceived anti-Semitism in Coughlin's speeches framed their concerns in terms of the safety of American Jews. A New Haven, Connecticut writer shared fears of an American *Kristallnacht* when they wrote, "Must we wait until Father Coughlins [sic] speech arouses ruffians to smash up Jewish citizens, and their homes and shops?"⁷⁴

⁷¹ Letter from Mr. and Mrs. Clement Reseska to Frank McNinch, 31 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

⁷² Letter from Marcus C. Nusbaum to the FCC, 12 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

⁷³ Letter from Max Press to President Roosevelt, 25 February 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 200.

⁷⁴ Letter from W.H. Pierson to Frank McNinch, 19 December 1938: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 203.

Coughlin's proponents and opponents alike sometimes framed their concerns in terms of American Judaism, whether that was opposing the supposed domination of Jews in radio or in the manufacture of "trashy" clothing, or fearing for their own safety from a possible duplication of the violence in Germany. Though obviously anti-Semitic in hindsight—and, of course, to many at the time—it is nevertheless clear that opinions about American Jews played a large role in Americans' opinions about Coughlin. Those who were anti-Semitic, that is, were unlikely to dislike Coughlin on principle—unless, of course, they had other religious prejudices.

Anti-Catholicism

Though this is far from an overarching trend in my sample in the way that anti-Semitism certainly is, some of the FCC letters contain blatant anti-Catholicism. But perhaps it is not so surprising: anti-Catholicism, like anti-Semitism—although less common and vitriolic—was far from a fringe trend in the early to mid-twentieth century.⁷⁵

Some anti-Catholic sentiment was connected both to Europe and to a lingering fear of papal influence in America. As one letter-writer from New York City advised the Department of Commerce, "If you want a revolution in thiscountry [*sic*] keep Ft [*sic*] Coughlin on the air. But please explain why the rest of us cannot speak against the Catholics who are toblame [*sic*] for all the troubles by Invading Ethiopia which to the Catholics is quite Godly." She concluded her letter with an indignant "Ar [*sic*] we to be turned over to ROME???"⁷⁶ "It is being said that the only reason the Federal Communications Commission tolerates the Anti-American Fascistic broadcasts of Father Coughlin is because the commission is controlled by Roman Catholics,"

⁷⁵ John P. Diggins, "American Catholics and Italian Fascism," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2, no. 4 (October 1967): 52. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/259822>.

⁷⁶ Letter from Edith N. Martin to the Department of Commerce, received 7 September 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 201.

wrote another New Yorker.⁷⁷ A third letter begins with a protest that Coughlin's words will lead to hatred and bloodshed: "This irresponsible ruffian and rabble-rouser is inciting to riot and violence and provoking race hatred among his ignorant followers, with attendant disorder and hooliganism." But the writer soon descends into some hatred and threats of his or her own: "This man appears to forget that a majority of the citizens of this country have tolerated the presence of the anachronistic, reactionary, Papist church with scant patience, and that it will take but a little more aggravation to bring about its suppression." They go on to say that "sowing the seeds of religious and class hatred must only mean a harvest of shocking excesses and a needless shambles."⁷⁸ Clearly, to this writer, his own religious prejudice was legitimate, but Father Coughlin's was not.

Though Coughlin's anti-Semitism was certainly worthy of censure—and he certainly received a share of it—it is also clear that not all of the hatred of Coughlin was motivated purely by opposition to his incendiary comments and attitudes. Some of the opposition was either based upon anti-Catholicism or was multifaceted, drawing both from the personal prejudice of the writers and from Coughlin's own prejudice that was on display for all of America to see—if they chose to look for it.

Competing Americas

What does it mean to be an American? Supporters and opponents of Coughlin had contrasting visions of America as a nation and about what it meant to be an American citizen—essentially, about what exactly was American or un-American—and these visions were incompatible. For those who agreed with Coughlin's worldview, removing him from the air was

⁷⁷ Letter from Michael Ross to the FCC, 17 May 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 201.

⁷⁸ Letter from R. Sheridan Hayes to the FCC, 21 August 1939: NA, FCC Records, RG 173, Entry 44-3, Box 201.

a transgression of the American Way that might unravel everything that the nation stood for. For those who disagreed with Coughlin, however, his continued presence on the air might destabilize the tolerance that Americans supposedly prized, leading to a surge in racism, or perhaps even a second *Kristallnacht*. Veterans interpreted their experiences during World War I in different ways, depending on whether they were “for” or “against” Coughlin: either he was a violation of what they fought for, or removing him from the air was. American citizens drew upon their rights—or their rights as they understood them—to critique or applaud the government’s and radio stations’ actions in censoring or not censoring the Radio Priest.

Coughlin’s supporters and opponents also fundamentally disagreed about the man himself. Were his speeches achieving some good in America, or were they inciting further hatred? Was Coughlin himself a good American or a poor example of an all-too-common prejudice? If Coughlin was indeed a fascist, was this a positive or a negative? These conflicting opinions certainly resist reconciliation. Coughlin could embody a range of things to a range of people. This echoes the debate between scholars over Coughlin today; though one would be hard-pressed to find a modern scholar who denies Coughlin’s anti-Semitism as some letter-writers did, scholars such as Brinkley and Warren nevertheless disagree about the extent of his prejudice. Was he a fascist or wasn’t he? In the wake of World War II and the revelation of the extent of the Holocaust, the label is certainly far less appealing in the wider public today than it might have been in the late 1930s. Just as Americans in 1938 could not agree, scholars today continue to disagree about at least some of the fundamentals of the Radio Priest.

Given the union of radio broadcasters’ courting of American opinion and Americans’ understanding of their rights as citizens, it is unsurprising that writers to the FCC believed so strongly that their opinion not only mattered, but mattered to the government specifically. Some

clearly expected that their lone voice would make a difference, whereas others only sought to add their protests to the pile. At the most basic level, if one thing might be agreed upon from this examination of letters, it is that Americans did *not* agree upon Charles Coughlin. In fact, they were deeply divided. Of the 318 letters in my 1938 sample, 123 were specifically in favor of Coughlin, and 175 were explicitly against him. In the 118 letters of the 1939 sample, this balance is reversed, though much closer in number: 54 were against Coughlin, and 60 supported him. Though certainly a truism, it is nevertheless apparent that there was no single American opinion about Coughlin. But if the FCC letters are anything to go by, it is also clear that Americans' opinions of Coughlin were more deeply felt and plainly expressed in 1938 than any time before or after, given the transparency with which he revealed his anti-Semitism, and the bluntness with which WMCA and other radio stations showed their hand.

CONCLUSION

Of the hundreds of letters in my sample, many are memorable for a variety of reasons: for their eloquence, for their fear, for their articulate arguments, or their blatant hatred. If it's fair to have a favorite, though, I can safely say that I do. Roy Meyers, writing for himself and his wife, penned a letter to President Roosevelt in order to express his belief that Coughlin had been far too critical of him. "I truly believe there would be millions that feel the same as we do," Meyers wrote. "I am 50 years old have been on W.P.A. 18 months and expect to get layed [sic] off but I am not complaining[.] We are thankful for what we have had." Meyers was seemingly hesitant to convey his thoughts, however: "I am only a man of the labor ranks," he wrote, "and this is the first time I ever voiced my opinion." But he, like many other Americans, nevertheless did voice their own opinions about Coughlin through letters. For Meyers, that opinion concerned Roosevelt's fitness for the office of the presidency. Coughlin's anti-Semitic *Kristallnacht* speech, Thompson's letter to McNinch, the general uncertainty of the Great Depression, and the ambiguous threat of a World War coalesced to give other Americans a reason to express their own opinions. These opinions covered a wide range of topics, including Americanism, what it means to be an American, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, the right to freedom of speech, and when that right should or should not apply. Unlike Meyers, whose letter is characterized by deference to the President, many wrote with the expectation that their demands—whatever they might be—would be answered. Many believed that the FCC ought to and would listen to their opinions because radio broadcasters and the rhetoric of American citizenship alike persuaded them that the government was bound to listen to them as taxpayers and citizens.

President Roosevelt probably never saw Meyers's letter, but someone at the FCC did. They stamped it and filed it away for us to discover more than 80 years later. Perhaps Meyers and his wife, like many other letter-writers, received a form-letter response from the FCC. Maybe, through happenstance, they received nothing at all. But whether or not each individual letter had an effect is immaterial. Americans, fearful for the future, wrote to the FCC in the hope that someone there would listen to their thoughts about Coughlin. And those thoughts, whether penned quickly or with great care, tell us much—but above all, they tell us that the controversy surrounding Coughlin prompted Americans to consider their rights and their responsibilities as Americans, and to articulate these thoughts to a government agency that they believed, rightfully or not, was bound to do something about the situation.¹

¹ David Goodman, “Before Hate Speech: Charles Coughlin, Free Speech and Listeners’ Rights,” *Patterns of Prejudice* 49, no. 3 (2015): 201. DOI: 10.1080/0031322X.2015.1048972

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