

Twisted Social Justice: Father Coughlin & the Christian Front

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Abstract

The Labor Encyclicals of Popes Leo XIII and Pius XI urged Catholics to engage in a program of social justice, emphasizing a sense of Catholic unity to reach this elusive goal. In the Depression-era United States, this sense of unity through social justice was twisted by the “radio priest” Father Charles Coughlin, and the followers of his grassroots movement, the Christian Front. For some American Catholics in 1938, social justice meant a campaign of united Christian action to combat communism.

The Christian Front became part of the fascist minded anticommunist movement of the late 1930s and early 1940s within the context of American Catholic anticommunism. Communism became the scapegoat for what was wrong in the United States. In an effort to fulfill their own quest of unity and social justice, (and in an effort to become “better” Catholic Americans), many who joined the Christian Front went on an all-out assault against the perceived greatest enemy of Christianity: communism. And in their efforts to re-connect to America by using their twisted sense of social justice, Catholics did so at the expense of the Jews.

Twisted Social Justice: Father Coughlin & the Christian Front

In 1891 Pope Leo XIII issued the labor encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* prompted by his concern that socialists are “working on the poor man's envy of the rich, are striving to do away with private property, and contend that individual possessions should become the common property of all, to be administered by the State or by municipal bodies.” From the Vatican perspective, Socialist efforts to achieve social justice by redistributing wealth and property from individuals to the greater community were counter-productive and destructive. According to the encyclical they struck “at the interests of every wage-earner, since they would deprive him of the liberty of disposing of his wages, and thereby of all hope and possibility of increasing his resources and of bettering his condition in life.”¹

The Socialist intent to redistribute wealth with the aid of governments was a “great and pernicious error” in the eyes of Leo XIII. The pontiff countered with the Catholic Church’s approach to cure the ills of the wage-earning labor class, and offered a different path to justice (a word he used seventeen times, although never referring to it as “social justice”). The pope never denied a role for government—in fact he explicitly stated that because “the mass of poor have no resources of their own to fall back upon” they “should be specially cared for and protected by the government.” Not surprisingly, he went on to assert that the foundation of justice must be laid in religion to ensure that the avenues of authority be “apportioned for the good of the society itself, and in such mode that difference in degree or standing should not interfere with unanimity and good-will.” To protect and safeguard the public welfare, members of every class were urged to

¹ *Rerum Novarum* (1891).

use all means possible to live by the Gospel doctrines of Christian life to “secure the good of the people” and awaken the charitable hearts in others. Pope Leo XIII desired that the classes of society be united both in the “bonds of friendship” and in “brotherly love.”²

Forty years later Pope Pius XI, issuing *Quadragesimo Anno, Encyclical of Pope Pius XI on Reconstruction of the Social Order* renewed the call for Catholics to unite in their efforts to promote a world in which social justice operated for the common good of all, Pius XI used the word “justice” thirty-seven times, and defined the law of social justice as follows:

[O]ne class is forbidden to exclude the other from sharing in the benefits. Hence the class of the wealthy violates this law no less, when, as if free from care on account of its wealth, it thinks it the right order of things for it to get everything and the worker nothing, than does the non-owning working class when, angered deeply at outraged justice and too ready to assert wrongly the one right it is conscious of, it demands for itself everything as if produced by its own hands, and attacks and seeks to abolish, therefore, all property and returns or incomes, of whatever kind they are or whatever the function they perform in human society, that have not been obtained by labor, and for no other reason save that they are of such a nature.³

Meant to be an alternative to the manifesto of Marxism and secularism, Pius XI’s encyclical acknowledged as a great and grave evil the disparity of wealth and goods between the “few exceedingly rich and the unnumbered propertyless.” His desire was that people “be effectively called back to and brought into conformity with the norms of the common good, that is, social justice.”⁴

Catholic social justice was meant to change the conditions of capitalism by offering every adult male laborer a wage “adjusted to the public economic good.” Wages not sufficient “to meet ordinary family needs adequately” led to disruptions in acceptable social norms (in the context of 1931) such as child and female labor. Pius XI explained that social justice demanded changes in the unlivable wages which led “to abuse the years of childhood and the limited strength of women is grossly wrong. Mothers, concentrating on household duties, should work primarily in the home or in its immediate vicinity. It is an intolerable abuse, and to be abolished at all cost, for mothers on account of the father's low wage to be forced to engage in gainful occupations outside the home to the neglect of their proper cares and duties, especially the

² *Ibid.*

³ *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931).

⁴ *Ibid.*

training of children.”⁵ In the Catholic approach this must be accomplished within the context of capitalism, because the alternative was degeneration into secular communism.

In other words, capitalists were their own worst enemies. In striving towards unchecked individualism, and denying laborers their proper due, capitalists inevitably pushed laborers to revolt against all institutions and God Himself. However, if free competition were kept in check by the authority of all public institutions, and tempered by the ideals of Christian charity, the result ought to be “all human society conform to the needs of the common good; that is, to the norm of social justice. If this is done, that most important division of social life, namely, economic activity, cannot fail likewise to return to right and sound order.”⁶

American Roman Catholic anticommunism thus emerged in the framework of the 1891 and 1931 Labor Encyclicals that urged Catholics to engage in a program of social justice, emphasizing a sense of Catholic unity. In the Depression-era United States, this program of social justice and unity inspired “radio priest” Father Charles Coughlin and the followers of his grassroots movement, the Christian Front, to form their own brand of anticommunist social justice.

Father Charles Coughlin

Father Charles Coughlin began his climb to prominence in the fight against anti-Catholic prejudice in the growing suburbs of Detroit, Michigan. In early 1926, Detroit Bishop Michael Gallagher attended the canonization rites of St. Thérèse, the Little Flower of Jesus, in Rome. Upon his return to Detroit, Gallagher decided to honor the new saint by building a church in her name twelve miles north of Detroit in the small suburb of Royal Oak. There were only thirty-two Catholic families in Royal Oak, but Gallagher believed that Catholics would be attracted to Detroit by the growing automobile industry and would settle in the Detroit suburb.⁷

Royal Oak was less than hospitable for a new Catholic Church in 1926. The town was rural and isolated until Detroit expanded during the first two decades of twentieth century. Residents of the community feared change and the encroachment of immigrants and Catholics.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Brinkley 89-90. Marcus 12.

As was the case in many fundamental Protestant communities during the 1920s, a significant percentage of the town's older residents joined the Ku Klux Klan.⁸

Bishop Gallagher knew that for his new parish to be successful he would have to find a young, aggressive pastor. He called upon an obscure, 34-year-old Detroit priest, Father Charles Edward Coughlin. The Canadian-born Coughlin, who was inspired by Thomas Aquinas' and Pope Leo XIII's teachings on social justice, met the challenge head-on.⁹

Just two weeks after the church's completion, Coughlin was summoned to his church by a late night telephone call. The July night was lit by a cross the KKK had set afire on the church's lawn. Coughlin knew that he had to address the Klan.¹⁰

Coughlin had a second problem: the weekly collections from his tiny parish were not enough to pay back the diocesan loan for the church's construction. He needed a way to solve both the problem of the Klan and lack of funds. His solution came in the form of Leo Fitzpatrick, the devout Catholic manager of the WJR radio station. Coughlin went to Fitzpatrick with his difficulties and explained that he wanted to do something to fight bigotry and strengthen his church. Fitzpatrick suggested preaching over the airwaves. On October 17, 1926 Father Coughlin delivered his first radio sermon with a special microphone set on his pulpit in Royal Oak. By the summer of 1930, the radio priest was broadcasting over the CBS network, and his voice had the potential of being heard by more than 40 million people. After a February 1932 broadcast he received 1.25 million letters and in 1936 listeners donated more than \$324,000 to his church. Father Coughlin became the nation's most effective radio politician.¹¹

By the late 1930s, the liberalism of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal was under constant attack. The conspicuous failure of the Roosevelt administration to solve the Great Depression—seventeen percent of the labor force was unemployed in 1939—infuriated those opposing the administration. The outbreak of war in Europe complicated the political atmosphere when it sparked the interventionist versus isolationist debate. The foreign policy rivals became more rancorous toward one another as America's involvement in the war became more realistic. Specters of fascism and communism haunted the controversy. Each side charged that America would fall victim to one of these hated "isms" if its enemy's position was adopted.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Aquinas believed in the economic rights of an individual, but those rights were qualified by the needs of one's neighbor.

¹⁰ Brinkley 82, 89-90. Marcus 22.

¹¹ Brinkley 82, 89-92. Craig 159, 276-77.

Interventionists feared that domestic fascists were already on the march; isolationists anticipated a communist revolution if American armed forces were shipped-off to fight in Europe, leaving the United States defenseless.¹²

Father Coughlin concluded that he was in a unique position to organize the nation's Catholics as a counterforce against those attempting to corrupt the United States. He turned to Pius XI's call for Catholic social justice as an inspirational response to the ills plaguing Depression-era America. Coughlin determined that an organized Catholic front was the best solution for the greatest social problem facing America—the threat of communism.¹³

For those who would follow Father Coughlin on a grassroots level, individuals who formed the core of the Christian Front, the problems with the economy, unemployment, and European refugees were embodied in the failings of the New Deal. This was not very different from most who opposed New Deal policies. However, the Christian Front branched into extremism with their explanation for the failures. The New Deal, the Roosevelt administration, and local levels of government's lack of success in dealing with problems were caused by communists and internationalist infiltration. The only way to solve the problems of the country was a return to a Christian America through a social justice campaign of united Christian action to combat communism.

United Christian action

"It is Christ or chaos! ... It is either Christian social justice or pagan social decay!"

Father Charles Coughlin, "What of the Future?" radio broadcast, August 27, 1939.¹⁴

On May 23, 1938, Father Charles Coughlin announced the creation of the Million League. The League was an umbrella for smaller Social Justice Platoons of twenty-five members each. The duty of each platoon member was to contact another twenty-five individuals to create another platoon. And so on, to continue the spread of platoons. The units were loosely organized and had no direct organizational connections to each other. Coughlin stated the platoons were "directly affiliated with me." At first, people were surprised at the military connotations of "platoon," but the reason for the military terminology soon became evident.

¹² Ribuffo 178-85.

¹³ Bayor 97. Brinkley 254-55.

¹⁴ Curran, *The Challenge of the Pact and the Challenge of Social Justice*.

Coughlin announced in the June 27, 1938 edition of *Social Justice* that there were forces within America intent on destroying American liberty. Led by clever and scheming minds, these forces were “engineering the mechanism of a juggernaut of hatred, slavery and death.” The only salvation for America must be a Christian Front—an obvious play on the communist “Popular Front.” Coughlin warned Americans that all foreign “isms” were prepared to “plung[e] its dagger into YOU.” The blade of the dagger was communism. The only way to dull the blade was if every Christian man and woman in the United States, regardless of age or creed, stood “shoulder to shoulder.” On November 6, 1938, he proclaimed “It is necessary for us to solidify and strengthen a virile, closely woven Christian Front.”¹⁵

Coughlin continued to promote the idea of a Christian Front from that point forward, emphasizing that the enemies of Americanism could only be met by a Christian Front counterforce inspired by a program of social justice. So dear was the idea of social justice to Coughlin, his own newspaper adopted the name *Social Justice* in March 1936.

The constitution for New York City’s Christian Front was formally adopted on August 11, 1938. Throughout the summer of 1938, members of various anticommunist groups in New York City began to meet in the rectory of St. Paul the Apostle Church on 61st Street in Manhattan. The Paulist Fathers allowed the group to use their post office box as the group’s mailing address and agreed that the Paulist Press would print the group’s material.¹⁶

Christian Front membership grew quickly, ranging from business men to blue collar workers to the unemployed. Propaganda, boycott, and employment groups were formed. A speaker’s bureau, trade bureau, and mutual aid committee were all established. Membership cards were printed beginning in September 1938, which members received after they paid a one dollar membership fee and submitted a picture. Some of the tougher members provided muscle as protection for the speakers and distributors of literature. If situations got out of hand, a bail bond fund was arranged to release any speaker or activist who was arrested.¹⁷

¹⁵ Marcus 68. *Social Justice*, May 23, 1938: 8, June 27, 1938: 23; July 11, 1938: 23. “What Is the Christian Front?": 1-2, GJP. Harold C. Urey, et al., letter to Frank Murphy, January 18, 1940; Thomas E. Stone, letter to Robert Jackson, January 19, 1940; O. John Rogge, letter to Harold Kennedy, January 20, 1940; Harold Kennedy, letter to O. John Rogge, January 22, 1940; O. John Rogge, letter to Thomas E. Stone, January 23, 1940, box 8, USAJP-AF.

¹⁶ McCarthy 11-12. “Minutes - Christian Front meetings;” “Subject — The Christian Front; Origin, etc.,” Christian Front, September 1939, Christian Front file, AJCL. Certificate of Incorporation of Christian Front, box 6, USAJP-AF.

¹⁷ “Subject—The Christian Front; Origin, etc.,” Christian Front file, AJCL.

The Front's officially stated mandate was to organize Christians to battle communism. Units soon formed in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx, which became coordinating agencies for the *Social Justice* distributors' groups. Members from other ultra-nationalist, pro-fascist, and pro-Nazi groups associated themselves with the Christian Front almost immediately.¹⁸

The Christian Front's pursuit of Christian unity eventually led it to claim it was the duty of all Christian Americans to act, buy, and vote Christian and that the Front was to make sure Christians did their duty. Fronters reveled in their delusion that they were leading a crusade to retake America for Christians.¹⁹

The importance of Christian unity to the Christian Front was extremely significant. Christian unity was the most popular topic of all recorded CF speeches in 1939 and 1940, accounting for 25.81% of topics in all speeches. The call for Christian Americans to act, buy, vote and think Christian accounted for 68.40% of all the topics in Christian unity speeches.²⁰

The Christian Front promoted itself as the model for Catholic-Protestant unity, fulfilling the promise of *Quadragesimo Anno*'s invitation to members of other faiths to join the Catholics' fight against communism. Both Catholic and Protestant clergy were invited to speak at what the Front billed as "a large meeting for peace." Other unity meetings welcomed "Christian Americans only." However, CF supporters were able to point to so few examples of inter-denominational or inter-ethnic cooperation that it should have been clear that Christian unity simply was not that important to most Christians. Furthermore, the CF's efforts to mobilize a unified Protestant-Catholic front disregarded historic and religious realities. The Front blamed

¹⁸ Father Charles E. Coughlin Report, Mar. 17, 1942: 3, 12, FBI file (Detroit) 100-4716, CCFBI. "Subject — The Christian Front; Origin, etc.," Christian Front file, AJCL.

¹⁹ These were the actual words of Christian Fronters. They would constantly urge crowds to "Buy Christian, Think Christian, and Vote Christian," or used similar phraseology. Police Report, July 5, 1939; Police Report, July 5, 1939, OCF.

²⁰ New York City Police Department officers, detectives, and police stenographers attended, observed and issued reports on 368 Christian Front events between April 15, 1939 and October 9, 1940. The reports were filed among the "Organization" papers kept by Fiorello LaGuardia. The Christian Front file in only one of many of the "Organization" files located in the Fiorello LaGuardia papers in the New York City Municipal Archives containing extensive police reports and meeting minutes from most groups deemed subversive by the mayor's administration. The New York City Police Department recorded 1,152 different speeches at Christian Front events between 1939 and 1940, covering, what I determine to be, 2,305 topics. Many speeches covered more than one topic. The Christian unity topic was discussed 595 times, of the 2,305 topic discussions. Buy, vote, act, and think Christian accounted for 407 of the 595 Christian unity discussions.

their failure on the standard scapegoats—the “opposition,” which was doing everything it could to block unity, and the ignorance of priests and ministers.²¹

The call for a Christian Front army was the most striking example of the Front’s Christian unity rhetoric. The Front called for Christian youth in America to band together, so that Americans would never experience the terrors of communism. Speakers specifically stated that membership was open to *all* Christians: Lutherans, Baptists, Presbyterians, and Catholics. But before anyone could be accepted for membership he would be investigated to see whether he met the requirements of the organization—was he a Christian? These Christian soldiers would begin defending Christianity the second “one drop of Christian blood has been shed...and if a drop of Christian blood is shed on this soil, there won’t be a Communist left to gloat over it.”²²

Acting Christian included everything Fronters spoke of associated with their proposal for a Christian America. Whether they urged people to vote Christian, buy Christian, or support Coughlin, they viewed all this rhetoric as furthering the cause of Christian unity. Many times Fronters would not even define “act Christian”—they would just say it. The Fronters became more specific when they spoke about buying and voting Christian. These definitions were more obvious. Buying Christian included patronizing Christian-owned businesses, boycotting Jewish-owned businesses, and railing against the “Jewish-controlled” media which fed into their anti-Semitism.

Voting Christian did not refer only to voting for Christian candidates based strictly on their religion. There was a greater goal for voting Christian, according to the Front. Theoretically, voting Christian bolstered Christian power at the expense of their communist and internationalist enemies. Throughout New York City, Fronters told crowds to use good judgment and investigate candidates before voting. Christian citizens were supposed to ascertain whether candidates were communist or Christian before casting their votes. Only this type of “intelligent” voting could ensure proper Christian representation in all levels of government, retaking the positions of authority they once held.²³

²¹ *Brooklyn Tablet*, Feb. 25, 1939: 8. Police Report, Sept. 19, 1939; Police Report, Sept. 26, 1939; Police Report, Nov. 22, 1939; Police Report, Jan. 6, 1940, OCF.

²² Det. Stanley Gwozdo to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Information Bureau, July 7, 1939; Police Report, July 11, 1939; Ptl. Fred G. Graumann to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Investigation, Aug. 16, 1939; Police Report, Sept. 11, 1939; Police Report, Sept. 14, 1939; Police Report, Sept. 15, 1939, OCF.

²³ Report of Meeting, Sgt. Roulston, 30 Pct., Aug. 8, 1939; Police Report, Aug. 15, 1939; Det. William A. Justy to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Squad, Aug. 16, 1939; Ptl. Fred G. Graumann to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Investigation Bureau, Sept. 29, 1939, OCF.

Therefore, by voting Christian, Christians would be using democratic methods to replace politicians who were viewed as having usurped power (i.e. communists and internationalists). The Christian Front was using both economic and political means to bring about their ideal of a socially just Christian America.

Anti-Semitism and the Buy Christian movement

“Buy” movements in New York City were commonplace throughout the 1930s. The promotion of economic support of one ethnicity over another usually adopted the strategy of buying only from one’s own group while boycotting the offending group. The “Buy Christian” slogan was common to all anti-Jewish groups. In part the Buy Christian movement was a backlash to Jewish boycotts of Nazi Germany’s goods.²⁴

The Buy Christian movement, spearheaded by the Christian Front, contained two distinct, but not mutually exclusive, elements. Some speakers focused strictly on supporting Christian businesses simply because the proprietors were Christian. Crowds were urged to support Christian businesses, even “if they have to walk 20 blocks to a Christian store.”²⁵

The second aspect of the boycott movement specifically aimed at hurting Jews economically. The Buy Christian movement was colored very heavily by anti-Semitism. It was not enough simply to support fellow Christian businesses for the sake of their economic well-being. In the mind of many Fronters, the best way to show Christian economic power was to break the perceived “Internationalist” Jewish death-grip on the American economy.²⁶

The Christian Front’s Buy Christian movement began soon after the WMCA radio station was picketed for removing Father Coughlin from the airwaves. Protesters expanded their demonstrations to boycotts of the station’s sponsors. Taking advantage of this, on December 29, 1938, Front leader John Cassidy announced the organization of the Christian Front Flatbush Unit to fight communism. The first activity engaged in by the unit was organizing boycotts of WMCA sponsors and to prevent patronizing those establishments by force if necessary.²⁷

²⁴ According to the American Jewish Committee, the slogan originated with Christian Fronter John Geis, editor of *Wisdom*. “Christian Mobilizers: Their Purpose, Aim and Activities,” 3, Joseph McWilliams file, AJCL. “Joseph McWilliams biography,” Joseph McWilliams file, AJCL.

²⁵ Police Report, June 16, 1939, OCF.

²⁶ Police Report, June 30, 1939; Police Report, July 5, 1939; Det. Mario J. Fochi to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Squad, July 21, 1939; Report of Meeting, Lt. Stauffer, 105th Pct., July 20, 1939, OCF.

²⁷ Harold C. Urey, et al., memorandum to Frank Murphy, box 8, USAJP-AF.

The Christian Front quickly took up the boycott of Jewish businesses. Christian Front founder Marcel Honore intended to go to Jewish-owned department stores in Manhattan to ask management “How many employees have you? How many Jews have you employed? How many Christians have you employed?” If he got unsatisfactory answers, Honore planned to demand that at least 60% of the employees be Christian and to back up his demands would organize pickets with signs reading “THIS STORE UNFAIR TO CHRISTIANS.” The Front leader hoped that this would terrify the stores’ ownership and also demonstrate the power of the CF.²⁸

The Front used ugly anti-Semitic stereotypes to describe Jewish business policies. Jews were accused of “cut-throat business tactics” and could undersell legitimate businesses because of their sweatshops. Jewish businessmen were called “circumcisers” because of their strategy of posting going out of business signs in stores that were staying in business. Their false advertising enticed unsuspecting Christian patrons to shop at their shops, thinking they were getting a good deal. The result was those patrons did not shop at Christian-owned businesses. In other words, Jews were taking their “pound of flesh” from Christians—they methodically cut-off Christian shoppers from Christian merchants. Jewish merchants were denounced for unfair business practices and were accused of being irreligious because they failed to live up to the “Commandments of Moses.”²⁹

At last Coughlin joined the controversy. In a January 1939 broadcast he stated that the Jewish boycott of German goods would thrust the country into a war and that Americans “are opposed to any policy designed to create a world war for the sake of revenging the ill treatment meted out to any Jew or group of Jews resident in Germany ...”³⁰

For many of the Christian Fronters who roamed New York’s subways and streets yelling anti-Semitic diatribes, vandalizing Jewish businesses, and assaulting anyone who looked Jewish with black jacks and brass knuckles, getting the social justice Christians deserved meant “Buy Christian.” The Front placed abusive stickers on the windows of Jewish shops and compiled a

²⁸ “Minutes - Christian Front meetings,” Christian Front file, AJCL.

²⁹ Det. Stanley Gwozdo to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Investigation Bureau, July 12, 1939; Det. Mario J. Fochi to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Squad, July 21, 1939; Report of Meeting, Lt. Stauffer, 105th Pct., July 20, 1939, OCF.

³⁰ *New York Times*, Jan. 30, 1939: 14.

“Christian Index” to help organize boycotts against Jewish merchants. *Social Justice* salesmen clustered around Jewish owned department stores promoting their version of social equality.³¹

Following this line of Christian Front thinking, it was the Jews who did not act within the framework of social justice. The Jews were branded as the exclusionary ones, keeping Christians from realizing economic equality. The boycott was an obvious way of creating Christian unity by bringing Christians together as a monolithic economic unit to combat the supposed Jewish stranglehold on the American economy. Additionally, the CF claimed it was not doing anything the Jews were not already doing. “Boycott the boycotters” or “I urge all of you to vote for Christians only. Wake Up! Wake Up! Use their weapon. Boycott!” were common slogans.³²

Think Christian

Thinking Christian bound together the act, buy, and vote elements of the Christian Front’s program for Christian unity and social justice. According to Fronters, if Christians did not “think” in the prescribed Front manner, then it would be impossible for Christians to act in a socially just manner.

The Christian Front did not deny that the world may be a complicated place and the reasons why good people suffer may be difficult even for deep thinkers to understand. But if a person could “Think Christian” the complexities melted away. And, as far as the Front was concerned, “Thinking Christian” meant blaming the Jews. Once Jews were understood to be the underlying cause of the world’s problems, the world became easy to understand. Thinking Christian became a call for all Christian denominations, Catholic and Protestant, to unify as a monolithic ideological, political, and economic force.

Religiously based anti-Semitism was an integral element of “Thinking Christian” for the Front.³³ By attacking Jews specifically on religious terms, e.g. referring to Jews as “Christ-killers” or for their unwillingness to accept Christ as their savior, Jews were defined as the “Other.” The “Other” not only prevented the coming of the Kingdom on Earth, (i.e. the Jews

³¹ Emanuel Slee, letter to Fiorello LaGuardia, October 25, 1939, FLP, Roll 19; Irving Sobelman, letter to Fiorello LaGuardia, August 16, 1939, FLP, Roll 18. *New York Times*, Aug. 14, 1939: 32; Aug. 15, 1939: 4; Nov. 25, 1939: 12; Dec. 15, 1939: 22. Irwin 102. Smith 17. Taylor 35. Wechsler 2, 94.

³² “Minutes - Christian Front meetings,” Christian Front file, AJCL. Police Report May 26, 1939; Ptl. Fred G. Graumann to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Investigation Bureau, September 29, 1939, OCF.

³³ By this, I mean anti-Semitic rhetoric attacked Jews strictly on their religious beliefs; not because of any political or economic associations to communism or international bankers.

were the reason for failings within Christianity), but in the United States the “un-American” Jews were the reasons why the country was not fulfilling its destiny and causing the country’s collapse.

As was the case with so much of the CF’s ideology, its religiously-based anti-Semitism derived directly from Coughlin and his program of social justice. Christian Front supporter and Coughlin friend, Reverend Edward Lodge Curran explained the connection between Coughlin’s notion of social justice and Christianity during an August 1939 radio broadcast. The entire history and teaching of Christianity had culminated in the social justice movement. Curran described “the medieval guilds of the ages of Christian faith” as the first labor movements in history, and since the guilds’ purpose was both economic and spiritual, they were examples of organized social justice. The greatest modern-day threats to Christian social justice were the paganism of communism and Nazi Germany. The greatest American defender of Christian social justice was Father Coughlin, whose thirteen years on the radio propagated its message to Americans through the words of the popes. Curran added that Christian social justice was not limited by race, color or religion. It was for all Christians and Jews to accept, if they so chose. It was because that choice that was available to Jews, but they had rejected it, that Coughlinites justified their anti-Semitism, which was sometimes back-handed and subtle, but most times straight-forward and blatant.³⁴

Two days after Curran spoke, Coughlin broadcast a sermon, “What of the Future?” as a follow-up to Curran. Coughlin’s talk was published in the same pamphlet as Curran’s speech, *The Challenge of the Pact and the Challenge of Social Justice*. In it, Coughlin blamed European leaders, going as far back as the fifteenth century, for conspiring against the social doctrines of Jesus Christ. These leaders opposed the guild systems mentioned by Curran, instituted class conflict, re-established the materialism of the Roman Empire, and abandoned the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ and the brotherhood of man. In the place of Christian brotherhood, Europeans re-adopted the pagan individualism of ancient Rome. The evils of capitalism he traced to the evil of trying to get along without God, trying to succeed without following the path of Christ; and removing the teachings of Christ from banks, factories, and schools, and labor unions. Listeners who connected the dots knew who Coughlin meant: the Jews. Jews were the

³⁴ Curran, *The Challenge of the Pact and the Challenge of Social Justice*.

internationalist bankers; Jews were the factory owners; Jews had usurped the control of education and labor unions, all in the name of communism.³⁵

Labor Unions

When it came to unionism, the concerns of the Church's authorities and rank-and-file Catholics were in conflict. During the desperate times of the Great Depression, workers were most concerned with a job and a living wage, regardless of who supplied it. For Church leaders, it mattered greatly if those trying to help workers were communists. Invoking that the Encyclical of Pope Leo XIII was the only voice for labor, Edward Lodge Curran, portrayed the Catholic Church as a long-time friend of labor. To dissuade Catholics from supporting communist-led unions, he characterized working Catholic support for such unions as "false rumors concerning the attitude of Catholics toward labor and unionism."³⁶

For the CF, the only acceptable unions were those under Christian leadership. Early in 1938, those same Catholics who later went on to form the Christian Front hatched a plan to establish small, semi-autonomous units led by Christians within unions. These cells were to "bore from within" left-wing unions and oust the communist leadership. This plan was designed to counter the communists' financial support and physical aid to striking workers that subsequently positioned the communists to gain control of the union. After the Front gained momentum, Frontier Albert Gunnison suggested that the CF plan to do everything the communists were doing: hold street meetings, picket, and agitate to get Christian leaders into labor unions.³⁷

Other Catholic labor activists, who shared the CF's goals of Catholic labor leadership, but were tempered by more moderate visions of social justice, became alarmed at Fronters' methods. The liberal Association of Catholic Trade Unionists (established in 1937 to emphasize the social teachings of the Church in unions) feared CF infiltration into the unions would cause irreparable ethnic and religious schisms. In the end, as was the case with many of their initiatives, the CF failed miserably. Few Christian Front cells in unions were created.³⁸

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Brooklyn Tablet*, May 7, 1938: 16. Curran 2.

³⁷ *Brooklyn Tablet*, Jan. 28, 1938: 6. McCarthy 38. Police Report, Sept. 14, 1939, OCF.

³⁸ McCarthy 38.

James Fisher explains the quarrel between the Front and an opposing view of Catholic social justice, as expressed by the *Catholic Worker*. The Christian Front was supposed to defend the church against its enemies, but it only fueled hatred and created more suffering for Catholics. The Front held Catholic leadership, and in some cases Catholic laborers themselves, at fault for allowing communist domination of labor unions. On the other hand, the *Catholic Worker* movement emerged as a voice of enlightenment by promoting a sophisticated version of the gospel of acceptance of both Catholics and Jews.³⁹

Nevertheless, the Christian Front expressed the fears of Coughlin, Curran and others that Catholic workers might find themselves in communist unions. To Fronters, this could occur only with the aid of conspiratorial brainwashing conducted by corrupt unions. Claiming that the Front was the true standard-bearer of American labor and to define an acceptable Catholic-American labor identity, CF leaders Raymond Dalton and Arnold McCullough announced that the Christian Front was not against labor unions and in fact supported all unions whose platform was a decent living wage. They also announced that the Front was organizing its own labor school to educate Christian workers about union activities. They warned audiences to reject propaganda calling Father Coughlin and the Christian Front anti-labor—they were only against the communist leadership of unions which was blatantly un-Christian.⁴⁰

For the Front, the communist control of labor unions meant “Jewish” control. Front speakers denounced John L. Lewis for not fighting for the interest of the AFL, but rather for “the Internationalist,” a euphemism for Jews. Fronters demanded labor unions under Christian, not Jewish, leadership. Sometimes Fronters tried to be careful with their language, referring to control of labor unions by “a certain minority;” other times they simply followed their hearts and denounced Jewish “racketeers in labor organizations, labor unions, politics, and every industry.”⁴¹

Combating communism

"Communism is atheism and where there is Communism, Christianity goes out the door."

³⁹ Fisher 73, 85-86.

⁴⁰ Ptl. Fred G. Graumann to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Investigation, Aug. 16, 1939; Police Report, Aug. 31, 1939; Police Report, Sept. 15, 1939; Police Report, Nov. 14, 1939, OCF.

⁴¹ Police Report, Aug. 10, 1939; Ptl. Fred G. Graumann to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Investigation, Aug. 11, 1939; Report of Meeting, Lt. Touhey, 18th Pct. & Det. Schmidt, Alien Squad, Aug. 27, 1939; Police Report, Aug. 28, 1939; Ptl. Francis L. Hillick to Commanding Officer, Third Division, Aug. 29, 1939, OCF.

- Joseph Trebuh, August 8, 1939⁴²

In an effort to fulfill their own quest of unity and social justice—and in an effort to become “better” Catholic Americans—many who joined the Christian Front went on an all-out assault against the perceived greatest enemy of Christianity: communism. In the United States, the Christian Front became part of the fascist minded anticommunist movement of the late 1930s and early 1940s within the context of American Catholic anticommunism.

Christian Front anticommunists were, of course, responding to the same world situation as other anticommunists during the 1930s. The challenge was for anticommunists to oppose communism without seeming to support Hitler and without weakening the antifascist coalition. The Christian Front was organized when many American Catholics feared communism and its impact on the Catholic Church at home and abroad, and this outweighed any concern about the danger of fascism. It also placed supporters of the Front on the defensive, explaining that their version of anticommunism did not necessarily make them pro-fascist.⁴³ Nevertheless, most Fronters ignored this, and their focus was squarely on protecting Christian America from destruction at the hands of communists. It was of no real concern to them whether that made them look like fascists. In fact, some of them were.

The Christian Front proclaimed itself the protector of a Christian America that existed only in its collective mind. Its weapon was an unsophisticated and crude anticommunism. The CF’s brand of anticommunism placed it among those who in trying to defend democracy, abandoned it, as the Fronters separated themselves from the mainstream of Americans in holding that communism was a far greater threat than fascism.

The framework of Christian Front anticommunism was built upon the ideas of Catholic clergy who became supporters and contributors to the Front’s efforts. Much of the wild warnings about communism espoused by Fronters on the streets in 1938 and 1939 were found in tracts by these priests. A year before the CF’s founding, Reverend Thomas J. Feeney, S.J., Monsignor Fulton Sheen and Father Curran, were all feverishly writing anticommunist pamphlets. In their writings, opposition to communism went beyond defense of religion: communism was “primarily anti-human” because it taught class-hate and class-struggle. Sheen

⁴² Det. William A. Justy to Commanding Officer, Criminal Alien Squad, Aug. 9, 1939; Report of Meeting, Sgt. Lynch, 43 Pct. & Det. Justy, Alien Squad, Aug. 8, 1939, OCF.

⁴³ Curran, *Facts About Communism* 138. Powers 117.

based his anticommunism on Catholic humanism and held that the goal of that humanism, a world of peace and concord simply could not be reached beneath the yoke of communism.⁴⁴

Curran hailed Christianity as civilization's great defender against all totalitarian regimes throughout history, beginning with the Church's defeat of the Roman Empire 1,900 years earlier. The Roman Empire, which was built by a slave population, was destroyed by the Catholic Church because the Church preached freedom and opposed slavery, thereby becoming the first institution to sound the call for social justice. In the end, Christianity conquered the totalitarianism of Rome and planted the seeds of democracy. To prove Christianity's role in the development of democracy, he cited Robert Cardinal Bellarmine's supposed influence on Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence and called attention to the mention of God in the Founding Fathers' and early presidents' papers.⁴⁵

Curran further explained that the planned communist invasion of America was to be led by the leader of the Communist Party of the United States, Earl Browder, whom Curran called a modern incarnation of Pontius Pilate and the American representative of Stalin in the United States. Communists' attacks on Father Coughlin provided more evidence for Curran that communists only wanted to foment revolution and destroy religion. If Browder truly believed in social justice, as he claimed, then he would praise Coughlin and not scorn him. Curran used his description of Browder as a modern Pilate to underscore the communists' declaration of war against God and religion and their effort to reconstruct America on the "slave basis of Soviet Russia," just as Pilate knew Jesus Christ was the Son of God and proceeded with the crucifixion. There was no gray area in Curran's conclusion: there were no common aims between communism and Catholicism.⁴⁶

Nor was there any gray area in Christian Front anticommunism: it advocated aggressive attacks on communists, but they did not see this as an offensive strategy. Fronters thought they were simply defending Christianity and Americanism. They were self-proclaimed defenders of the faith. From the beginning, the extremism of the Christian Front's rhetoric portrayed them as defending their anticommunism against a powerful enemy. From the inception of the Christian Front in 1938, anticommunism was simply seen as a defense of Christianity.

⁴⁴ Sheen 46, JOC-DBA.

⁴⁵ Curran, *The Hand of Pilate* 14, 18.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* 7-10, 23.

Certain Catholic voices became increasingly concerned with the unprincipled anticommunism of the Coughlinites. Monsignor Michael Lavelle, the Vicar General of New York, was “worried about the constant hammering at communism.” Hoping that he would not be misunderstood in any way as favoring communism, he simply explained that such attacks “make people miserably unnecessarily.” His point was that the Communist Party did not have many members and received a low number of votes in federal and state election; therefore, the threat was not extraordinarily great. Emerson Hynes of the *Catholic World* agreed. He worried that Catholic anticommunism had largely become too negative and destructive in nature to remain a positive force of social justice in America and the Church.⁴⁷

Conclusion

The Christian Fronters defined themselves as the standard-bearers of social justice and Americanism. Their duty was to battle the enemies who usurped an exclusively Christian America—a cabal of communists, internationalists, and Jews. Fronters saw themselves as true—even truer—Americans because they were fighting to restore Christianity to America through a program of social justice by acting, buying, voting and thinking Christian.

Christian Fronters twisted the meaning of social justice to re-connect themselves to America largely at the expense of the Jews. In the end, the Christian Front’s definition of social justice meant equal opportunity for social and economic freedom—not for all, but reserved exclusively for their anointed Christian Americans.

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CCFBI	Charles Coughlin file, FOIA Reading Room, FBI.
FLP	Fiorello LaGuardia Papers, New York City Municipal Archives.
GJP	Gardner Jackson Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York.
JOC-DBA	Rev. John J. O’Connor Collection, Pamphlets, 1900-1959, Diocese of Brooklyn Archives.

⁴⁷ McCarthy 126. *New York Times*, June 24, 1938: 20.

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Published by the Forum on Public Policy

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