

## *Father Charles E. Coughlin—The “Radio Priest” of the 1930s*

by Karen G. Ketchaver

### INTRODUCTION

The date was July 16, 1936; the place was Cleveland, Ohio. The second national convention of the Townsend Old Age Revolving Pension Society was meeting in the immense Public Auditorium downtown. The final speaker of the day, a Roman Catholic priest from Royal Oak, Michigan, strode to the rostrum. He began speaking slowly and evenly about his organization, the National Union for Social Justice, his voice displaying the lilt of an Irish brogue. However, midway through his speech, his demeanor began to change. He became increasingly animated as he vehemently denounced the “money changers” of the Federal Reserve System and strongly criticized the president of the United States, whom the speaker had once enthusiastically supported. Working up a sweat, he removed his black coat and then ripped off his clerical collar; as the spellbound crowd of 10,000 rose to their feet, the speaker lashed out:

As far as the National Union is concerned, no candidate who is endorsed for Congress can campaign, go electioneering for, or support the great betrayer and liar, Franklin D. Roosevelt....I ask you to purge the man who claims to be a democrat from the Democratic Party—I mean Franklin Double-Crossing Roosevelt.<sup>1</sup>

The speaker was Father Charles E. Coughlin, a Canadian-born cleric who rose from obscure parish priest to one of the leading radio phenomena of his day, and who commanded a vast audience—at least ten million on an average Sunday. Some radio experts estimated it as the largest radio audience in the world.<sup>2</sup> *Fortune* magazine called Coughlin “just about the biggest thing that ever happened to radio.”<sup>3</sup> Although Coughlin began his radio career addressing only religious subjects, he expanded into the realm of politics by the early 1930s and aspired to be a major player in the presidential campaign of 1936. His views became increasingly extreme, and, by the latter part of the decade, he became increasingly anti-Semitic, stridently anti-communist, a fervent isolationist, and an admirer of European fascism.

Although Coughlin is chiefly thought about today (when he is thought about at all) as an historical footnote, in the 1930s he stood at the nexus of religion and politics. In addition to being a fascinating figure for historians and political scientists, theological libraries may find descriptions of the resources in the fields of history and political science that relate to Coughlin of interest. In addition, because talk radio continues to play a formidable role in American political life, it is useful to examine the life and times of such a seminal figure in the field. This bibliographical essay provides an overview of the life of Coughlin and highlights resources that illuminate the career and influence of the “Radio Priest.”

### COUGHLIN’S FORMATIVE YEARS

Alan Brinkley’s *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982) is the prime resource for both a description and evaluation of the life and impact of Coughlin. As the book’s

<sup>1</sup> David H. Bennett, *Demagogues in the Depression: American Radicals and the Union Party, 1932-1936* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, and the Great Depression* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 119.

<sup>3</sup> Bennett, 54.

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title denotes, Brinkley examines and contrasts both Coughlin and Huey P. Long, the Louisiana politician who was noted for his radical populist policies. Brinkley notes that both men sprang from modest origins to become the two most successful leaders of national political dissidence of their era. Both men appealed to the “average Joe,” the “forgotten man” who felt the effects of the Depression particularly keenly. Brinkley thoroughly describes the lives of his two subjects in a well-researched, well-written book. In addition to providing thorough biographical information, Brinkley discusses Coughlin’s and Long’s ideologies, successes, and failures. He sees both men as “manifestations of one of the most powerful impulses of the Great Depression, and of many decades of American life before it: the urge to defend the autonomy of the individual and the independence of the community against encroachments from the modern industrial state.”<sup>4</sup>

Donald Warren’s *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996) also provides detailed biographical information about Coughlin. In contrast to Brinkley, who takes a measured tone even when delineating Coughlin’s many failings, Warren’s dislike of Coughlin is obvious. As his subtitle indicates, Warren sees Coughlin as the first in a line of persuasive mass-media orators that continues through to the present day, referring to the priest as “the first public figure to obliterate the distinction between politics, religion, and mass media entertainment.”<sup>5</sup>

Both Brinkley and Warren describe Coughlin’s childhood and formative years. Coughlin was born in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada on October 25, 1891, the son of an American-born father who worked on Great Lakes steamers, found his way to Hamilton, and married a local girl. Coughlin’s parents were Roman Catholics. Coughlin’s mother, Amelia, was especially pious and early on had aspirations for her son to become a priest. The Coughlins’ second child, a daughter, died in infancy when Charles was eighteen months old. From that point on, Amelia devoted herself to her surviving child. Both Brinkley and Warren cite examples of Amelia’s efforts to manage every aspect of her son’s life. Brinkley offers some fascinating insight into the mother-son relationship, theorizing that Amelia’s protectiveness and control deeply influenced two important aspects of her son’s personality that would be much in evidence throughout his life – his brashness and his need to be the center of attention.

When Coughlin was twelve years old, priests at his parish school urged his parents to enroll him at St. Michael’s prep school, which was attached to St. Michael’s College of the University of Toronto (both institutions operated by the Basilian Fathers). The bright boy proved to be an excellent student and developed his talent as a public speaker. After graduating from the prep school in 1911, Coughlin began formal study for the priesthood. The Basilian emphasis on Catholic social activism would greatly influence Coughlin’s future ministry.

Coughlin was ordained to the priesthood in 1916 and embarked on a busy life as a teacher at Assumption College, a boys’ college administered by the Basilians near Windsor, Ontario, close to Detroit. However, despite being popular with both students and colleagues, Coughlin became restless, an aspect of his personality that Brinkley offers fine insight into. When an opportunity to leave the Basilians and become a priest of the Archdiocese of Detroit arose, Coughlin elected to do so. Both Brinkley and Warren offer useful speculation on Coughlin’s motivation to take the step that would prove to be life altering.

## BROADCASTING BECKONS

Coughlin spent two years in Michigan serving as an assistant in parishes in Kalamazoo and downtown Detroit. His intelligence and organizational ability attracted the attention of Bishop Michael J. Gallagher, who was to become

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<sup>4</sup> Brinkley, xi.

<sup>5</sup> Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 6.

Coughlin's greatest supporter. The bishop tapped Coughlin to start a new parish designated as a shrine to the recently canonized St. Therese of Lisieux, the "Little Flower," in Royal Oak, Michigan, in 1926. At the time, Royal Oak was a real backwater with few Catholic families, and Brinkley effectively describes the challenges (including an episode with the Ku Klux Klan) that confronted the new pastor. In *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), David M. Kennedy provides valuable insight into the socioeconomic group that Coughlin's new parish constituted—lower-middle-class auto workers looking to escape the inner city of Detroit for a better life in the suburbs.

One of Coughlin's major challenges at the Shrine was financial—raising money for the parish was a constant concern. (Brinkley describes some innovative methods Coughlin employed.) The situation brightened in October 1926 when Coughlin met Leo Fitzpatrick, the manager of Detroit radio station WJR. The priest mentioned his financial issues, so Fitzpatrick, who was aware of Coughlin's reputation as a talented preacher, suggested he try his hand at radio broadcasting as a way of creating a more favorable climate for Catholicism and to appeal for financial support. Charles J. Tull's *Father Charles E. Coughlin and the New Deal* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1965) and Brinkley's book offer in-depth discussion of the priest's initial foray into broadcasting. An instructive discussion of the early impact of radio on American society can be found in *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* by historian Lizabeth Cohen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Coughlin's first broadcasts were directed to children, but he began attracting adult listeners, prompting him to change the title of his program from "The Children's Hour" to "The Golden Hour of the Little Flower." It soon became obvious that Coughlin had a gift for the medium. The noted novelist Wallace Stegner, a fierce critic of Coughlin, describes the appeal of the priest's voice in his essay "The Radio Priest and His Flock" (in *The Aspirin Age, 1919-1941*, ed. Isabel Leighton; New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949, 232-257), calling it "a voice made for promises."<sup>6</sup> Stegner's essay offers great insight into the period and is a fascinating example of one prominent intellectual's reaction to the priest. Warren quotes network radio pioneer Frank Stanton's description of Coughlin as "the greatest voice of the twentieth century."<sup>7</sup> In *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998), communications studies scholar Ronald H. Carpenter provides an analysis of the rhetorical factors that contributed to Coughlin's role as a persuader. Carpenter's book, part of Greenwood's Great American Orators series, provides a critical analysis of the priest's technique and includes the texts of six of Coughlin's key speeches, spanning the years from 1931 to 1938.

Coughlin's Sunday afternoon broadcasts began to attract a wider audience, not only from throughout Michigan but from neighboring states as well. In fall 1930, the priest climbed another rung on the radio ladder when his program began airing on the CBS network, giving him access to a national audience of up to forty million people.

Coughlin's topics during his first three years on the air were generally uncontroversial and kept to religious themes, although he did attack the Ku Klux Klan and, later, supporters of birth control. However, a series of sermons in 1928 criticized Norman Thomas, the Socialist Party candidate for president. By 1930, Coughlin began to venture into politics more deeply, assailing communism and warning that the United States was being corrupted from within by the "purple poison of Bolshevism."

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<sup>6</sup> Wallace Stegner, "The Radio Priest and His Flock," in *The Aspirin Age, 1919-1941*, ed. Isabel Leighton (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1949), 234.

<sup>7</sup> Warren, 26.

As signs of the Depression became increasingly evident, Coughlin altered his focus. Brinkley discusses how Coughlin began to shift from emphasizing the perils of communism and socialism to speaking in more populist terms and criticizing the American economic system. Additional analysis of Coughlin as a new type of “evangelical populist” is offered by Michael Kazin in his book *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

## ENTRY INTO POLITICS AND THE PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN OF 1936

Although Coughlin had initially been an ardent supporter of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the mercurial priest began expressing ambivalence toward New Deal policies by 1934. Coughlin broke definitively with Roosevelt in November of that year, when the priest announced his establishment of the National Union for Social Justice (NUSJ) and exhorted his listeners “to organize for social united action which will be founded on God-given social truths.”<sup>8</sup> Brinkley, Kazin, and Kennedy analyze Coughlin’s entrance into politics and detail the priest’s miscalculations.

Early in the election year of 1936, Coughlin launched a weekly newspaper, *Social Justice*. Although E. Perrin Schwartz, who had been city editor of the *Milwaukee Journal*, was listed as the official editor of the paper, Coughlin controlled most of the content. Tull and Kazin give more details, and Carpenter offers corroboration by a former *Social Justice* staff member.

Despite Coughlin’s denial that he had any ambitions to start a third political party, the priest used *Social Justice* to urge his supporters to become involved in the upcoming congressional elections. By early April, Coughlin was soundly criticizing both political parties. Coughlin-supported candidates were successful in some state congressional primaries, but the role of the Radio Priest and the NUSJ might not have been as critical as it first seemed; Brinkley offers a more nuanced discussion of the political climate at the time. Coughlin was buoyed by the primary results, however, and his earlier reluctance to support a third-party candidate for president evaporated. Brinkley describes the odd candidate who materialized: William Lemke, “a short, unprepossessing, second-term Congressman from North Dakota.”<sup>9</sup>

On June 19, 1936, Coughlin announced his support for Lemke as the presidential candidate of the newly formed Union Party, which was a coalition of the supporters of Dr. Francis E. Townsend’s Old-Age Revolving Pension Society, the Share Our Wealth Society (headed by Reverend Gerald L. K. Smith, successor to the slain Huey Long), and Coughlin’s followers. David H. Bennett’s book *Demagogues in the Depression: American Radicals and the Union Party, 1932-1936* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1969) is an invaluable resource for anyone wishing to learn more about this fascinating period of American political history. Bennett provides in-depth discussion of Coughlin, Townsend, Smith, and Lemke (a most unusual cast of characters!) in the first half of the book, then devotes the second part to the Union Party and the election. An excellent discussion of the 1936 election and Coughlin’s role in it is provided by Philip A. Grant, Jr. in his article “The Priest in Politics: Father Charles E. Coughlin and the Presidential Election of 1936” (*Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 101, no. 1-2 (Spring 1990)).

As the presidential campaign got underway in summer, the Union Party was widely considered to be a potentially important factor in the race. Although most observers did not believe Lemke could win, there was a strong feeling

<sup>8</sup> Brinkley, 113.

<sup>9</sup> Brinkley, 254.

that he could draw enough votes away from Roosevelt to ensure the election of the Republican candidate, Alfred Landon. In Stegner's view, Coughlin believed that the Union Party ticket had a chance to carry enough states to prevent a majority for either party, thus throwing the election into the House of Representatives. Coughlin himself hoped that such a show of strength in 1936 would bode even better for the Union Party in 1940.

Coughlin was much in evidence at two high-profile gatherings in Cleveland in the summer of 1936: the national convention of the Townsend organization in July and the first annual convention of the NUSJ in August. Coughlin, planning to deliver the climactic speech of the Townsend convention, had arranged to be the final speaker at the last evening session. When Gerald L. K. Smith preceded him with what journalist Gerold Frank dubbed "one of the finest rabble-rousing, Bible quoting harangues ever given at a national convention," Coughlin was visibly annoyed at being upstaged.<sup>10</sup> After the screaming standing ovation for Smith had ended and it was Coughlin's turn to speak, the priest became so exercised that he removed first his coat and then his clerical collar as he denounced the president as a "betrayed," a "liar," and a "double-crosser." Bennett, Brinkley, and Stegner give vivid (and wry) descriptions of the goings-on, which captured the attention of the nation.

The NUSJ convention, designed to be entirely Coughlin's show, kept the eyes of Americans riveted on Coughlin. Tull likens the atmosphere to that of a religious revival rather than a political meeting. Eminent Roosevelt scholar Lawrence E. Leuchtenburg also provides colorful descriptions of Coughlin's rabid supporters in his book *The FDR Years: On Roosevelt and His Legacy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995). The climax of the convention was the Radio Priest's speech to 42,000 enthusiastic delegates in Cleveland's cavernous Municipal Stadium. After accusing President Roosevelt of being "communistic," Coughlin stepped back from the microphone and collapsed. Doctors diagnosed only a simple case of exhaustion, but Brinkley, Bennett, and Leuchtenburg speculate that the troubled campaign of the Union Party was likely a larger factor in Coughlin's distress. Divisions had broken out in the party, and the campaign was not going well.

As support for the Union Party dwindled, Coughlin's previous undercurrent of anti-Semitism became more pronounced, and his rhetoric became more extreme, such as asserting that Roosevelt was "anti-God." Coughlin's intemperate remarks prompted eminent Catholic leaders, among them Archbishop John T. McNicholas of Cincinnati, Bishop Joseph Schrembs of Cleveland, and Monsignor John A. Ryan of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, to speak out against the Radio Priest. The "orator of Royal Oak" was becoming a major problem for the leaders of the American Catholic Church. Rather than being chastised, Coughlin ramped up his attacks.

At the NUSJ convention, Coughlin had promised that he would leave radio forever if he failed to deliver 9,000,000 votes for Lemke. When Roosevelt won in a landslide, carrying forty-six of the forty-eight states, the Union Party suffered a humiliating defeat—Lemke received only 892,492 votes. After the election, Coughlin made good on his promise to leave the airwaves—for six weeks.

## COUGHLIN'S DENOUEMENT

Coughlin made a "temporary" return to radio on January 1, 1936. However, although his broadcasts continued to attract a large audience, the Radio Priest began to lose his luster. Brinkley and Tull describe Coughlin's descent into what Brinkley calls a "crude and embittered conservatism."<sup>11</sup> Coughlin's anti-Semitism became overt and increasingly ugly. When war broke out in Europe in 1939, Coughlin vehemently opposed any involvement by the United States. He also spoke admiringly of aspects of Italian fascism and German Nazism. By the end of

<sup>10</sup> Bennett, 11.

<sup>11</sup>Brinkley, 266.

1940, Coughlin had virtually no access to the airwaves, but he continued to publish his views in *Social Justice*, making anti-Semitic remarks and praising the superior strength of the Axis powers. Less than six months after the United States entered World War II following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, *Social Justice* was barred from the mails. In May 1942, Coughlin announced that in accordance with orders from Church superiors, he was severing his ties to *Social Justice* and ceasing all political activities. The Radio Priest who had commanded the attention of America for a decade withdrew into parish life at the Shrine of the Little Flower. Tull, Brinkley, and Warren eloquently summarize Coughlin's later years. Warren's book, the most recent among these three, goes into more detail regarding Coughlin's life once he was out of the political limelight. According to Warren, just as in Coughlin's heyday in the 1930s, the priest continued to inspire strong reactions from both parishioners and fellow clergy: some praised him extravagantly while others denounced him bitterly. Charles E. Coughlin died on October 27, 1979, six days after his eighty-eighth birthday.

### ADDITIONAL COUGHLIN RESOURCES

Although the works reviewed so far form the essential core reading on Coughlin, there are other valuable resources. A book that would be of special interest to theological librarians is Mary Christine Athans' *The Coughlin-Fahey Connection: Father Charles E. Coughlin, Father Denis Fahey, C.S.Sp., and Religious Anti-Semitism in the United States, 1938-1954* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991). Athans examines the relationship between Coughlin and the Irish theologian Father Denis Fahey, in whose writings Coughlin found a theological rationale to justify his anti-Semitic statements. Athans' carefully researched work identifies Fahey as a major influence on Coughlin, who also publicized Fahey's work in the United States and disseminated it to notable Protestants who used the Irish theologian's books as a partial rationale for their own anti-Semitic crusades.

Another work, *Father Coughlin: The Tumultuous Life of the Priest of the Little Flower* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), is a readable biography by Sheldon Marcus. The book is notable because Coughlin granted an interview to the author (according to Marcus, the first time since 1933 that the priest agreed to assist a biographer). Throughout his life, Coughlin was notorious for repeatedly contradicting himself. Coupled with the fact that Marcus interviewed Coughlin in 1970, decades after the events discussed had transpired, it is unlikely that Coughlin's statements provide an accurate record. Marcus does provide extensive documentation and often points out places where Coughlin's recollections are not supported by the historical record.

Coughlin was the subject of a number of works published in the 1930s by authors who either loved or loathed him (seemingly no one was neutral toward the Radio Priest). Thus, the books are highly subjective, but they provide a glimpse into that turbulent time and demonstrate the strong response the priest evoked. Ruth Mugglebee, a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, interviewed Coughlin in the early 1930s and became a great admirer. Her effusive biography, *Father Coughlin of the Shrine of the Little Flower* (Boston: L. C. Page, 1933), displays her characteristically overblown style. *Father Charles E. Coughlin; an Authorized Biography* by Louis B. Ward (Detroit: Tower Publications, 1933) was written by one of the priest's key advisors. This book is obsequiously reverent and far from objective.

Among contemporary works that are critical of Coughlin, Raymond Gram Swing's *Forerunners of American Fascism* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1935) and *The Fine Art of Propaganda: A Study of Father Coughlin's Speeches*, edited by Alfred McClung Lee and Elizabeth Briant Lee (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1939), are most often cited by scholars who have written about Coughlin. Swing, a respected journalist who became an influential radio commentator in the 1930s, chronicled the rise of German Nazism and was a fierce opponent of fascism.

*Forerunners of American Fascism* was published just before Coughlin embarked on the most controversial phase of his career, but Swing does not mince words about the orator of Royal Oak. For example, Swing notes that he found many of Coughlin's speeches technically similar to those of Adolf Hitler. The Lees, eminent scholars in the field of sociology, edited *The Fine Art of Propaganda* under the auspices of the Institute for Propaganda Analysis, Inc. Their book, which is still relevant seventy years after its first publication, analyzes the chief propagandistic devices and demonstrates how Coughlin employed them.

Finally, anyone interested in a deeper study of Coughlin should consult the excellent digital collection maintained by the University of Detroit Mercy, "An Historical Exploration of Father Charles E. Coughlin's Influence."<sup>12</sup> It includes a biographical sketch of Coughlin and links to a variety of educational resources (including bibliographies, an historical perspective of the Great Depression and World War II, lesson plans for use with middle- and high-school social studies classes, and descriptions of many Holocaust museums and collections). The site also offers a treasure trove of digitized primary sources, including an image collection, a radio broadcast pamphlet collection, a *Social Justice* newspaper collection (digital images of the complete run of the newspaper), and a radio broadcast audio collection that includes more than sixty broadcasts. This digital collection offers an unmatched opportunity for interested individuals to "virtually encounter" the Radio Priest.

## CONCLUSION

The resources described in this essay provide a wide array of sources for researchers delving into Coughlin's life, rhetoric, and political views. However, there remains a need for a scholarly, objective biography of this controversial figure. It would be fascinating to discover more about Coughlin's relationship with his mother and how it contributed to his lifelong compulsion for acclaim and control. An in-depth exploration of Coughlin's interest in social justice is also called for. As a seminarian, Coughlin was gripped by Pope Leo XIII's 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum* ("On the Condition of the Working Class") and by the works of St. Thomas Aquinas as they related to Catholic social activism. Coughlin's passion for these concepts appeared to be sincere, at least initially. However, his overweening ego, coupled with his prejudice and overly simplistic socioeconomic theories, ultimately doomed his mission. What motivated Coughlin to overreach his priestly vocation and grasp for the mantle of national political powerbroker? How could a priest who invoked the name of the "gentle Master" Jesus often exhibit a decided lack of Christian charity? Was Coughlin so dazzled by his national notoriety that he compromised (many would say abandoned) his ideals? An insightful biographer could illuminate the many contradictions that marked the life and career of the "orator of Royal Oak"—surely one of the most controversial figures in both American history and religion.

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<sup>12</sup> [http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special\\_collections/digital/coughlin/index.php](http://research.udmercy.edu/find/special_collections/digital/coughlin/index.php).

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