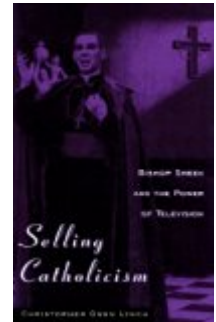


Christopher Owen Lynch. *Selling Catholicism: Bishop Sheen and the Power of Television.* Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. xii + 200 pp. \$24.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8131-2067-6.



Reviewed by Robert E. Weir

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Christopher Owen Lynch's biography of Fulton Sheen is a bit like the effusive bishop himself: best when ecumenical and problematic when stretching metaphors.

Lynch's premises are sound. He argues that Sheen's "Life is Worth Living" TV series helped bring Catholicism into the American mainstream. Sheen's homilies aired between 1952 and 1957, a crucial period in American life marked by Cold War fears and pressures for conformity. By linking the church of Rome to Cold War anti-communism, Sheen equated Catholicism with Americanism. This helped reverse an historical association between Catholicism and immigrants and repaired reputational damage by Father Charles Coughlin in the 1930s.

Lynch is also on target when identifying Sheen as the prototype of modern televangelists. In many respects Sheen was the heir to Bruce Barton, taking full advantage of TV's still-limited commercial possibilities. Sheen played to the camera, used dramatic lighting, didactic props, and pithy sound bites to convey his messages. Like Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, Sheen used the prestige of

his office to spin teleological but apocryphal tales. His insistence on wearing his cassock on-camera lent authority to a telegenic performance.

Lynch deftly contrasts Sheen with his main competition: Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale. As a Catholic rooted in Thomist scholasticism, Sheen rejected the Calvinist predestination of Graham and the soothing nostrums of Peale. Lynch demonstrates how Sheen appealed to the medieval past to strike a balance between materialism and spirituality. The effect was a theology that was more redemptive than Graham's, but imbued with a stronger sense of sin than Peale's.

Lynch also argues that Sheen had a political impact. By bringing Catholicism to the fore, he softened the sort of prejudices that led Al Smith to electoral disaster in 1928. Though biases remained, by 1960 it was possible to elect John Kennedy to the presidency.

Lynch is more convincing discussing Sheen's media savvy than his importance as an intellectual. He sees Sheen as the middle ground between Graham and Peale. In truth, Peale was more the centrist than Sheen, whose rabid anti-commu-

nism and gender chauvinism placed him closer to Graham than Lynch acknowledges. The left is better represented as starting with the tough liberalism of Reinhold Niebuhr and ending with pacifist anti-Cold War Quakers and Anabaptists. (Ironically, Sheen's late-life opposition to the Vietnam War pushed him further left.) Lynch too often represents American religious pluralism as a triad.

Lynch also tends to confuse Sheen's educational credentials with his TV sermons. He takes simplistic on-air statements and attempts to dress them in Thomist and Augustinian intellectual garb. Thus Sheen's anti-communism is rooted in a mystical conception of the medieval "cathedral principle of good" (p. 101). Sheen expressed himself in such terms, but as an *ex post facto* explanation for his political views.

Lynch does well in showing the special challenges faced by Catholic media prelates. Sheen had to shape messages that were at once vague and ecumenical enough to avoid offending Protestants or Jews, but imbued with enough Catholicism to satisfy his superiors. Through cornball humor, schmaltzy anecdotes, and sheer charisma, Sheen managed to lower anti-Catholic defenses and occasionally interject overtly Catholic doctrines.

Oddly, Lynch writes as if he too is walking a doctrinal tightrope. He writes eloquently of the social and intellectual world of the 1950s, and locates Sheen's messages within a climate of technological gadgetry, intellectual paranoia, consumerist frenzy, white conformity, and black upheaval. But when the narrative touches on Sheen's scripts, sermons, or writings, Lynch switches from past tense to the present imperative, as if Sheen's old saws had hermeneutic relevance. In doing so, Lynch over-extends ideas of the usable past. Sheen's cornpone sentimentality, anti-communist paranoia, and sexism ought to be labeled for what they are: out-moded products of a bygone era.

Lynch's reluctance to criticize Sheen shows up repeatedly. He sugarcoats Sheen's legendary ambition by highlighting unconvincing self-deprecating stories. Nor does he seriously engage the Catholic Church's institutional red-baiting activities like Father Charles Rice's attacks on left-led unions and the Church's role in harboring ex-Nazis useful as Soviet spies. Equating Catholicism with Americanism meant more than fuzzy homilies; it meant surrendering principles in favor of politics. These glosses result in lost opportunity for Lynch. Sheen's ultimate repudiation of the Vietnam War represents a break from Cold War Catholicism and distanced him from his more conservative nemesis, Cardinal Spellman. So did Sheen's late-life social activism. Sheen's TV ratings notwithstanding, Roman Catholicism experienced a dramatic growth spurt in the 1960s, when the Church sought social relevance rather than political acceptance.

Overall, Lynch offers a provocative but insufficiently analytical look at a neglected pioneer of the electronic pulpit. *Selling Catholicism* is worthwhile for what it reveals about how Sheen sold the Church of Rome as an American commodity. It is less successful when the author feels compelled to continue the sales pitch.

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