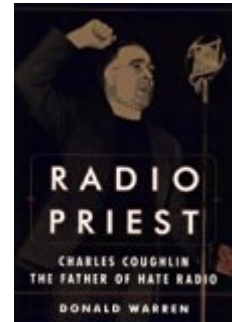


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Donald Warren. *Charles Coughlin: The Father of Hate Radio*. New York: The Free Press, 1996. ix + 376 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-684-82403-1.

Reviewed by Leslie Woodcock Tentler (University of Michigan-Dearborn)
Published on H-Antisemitism (April, 1997)



Vox Populi? Revisiting the Career of Father Charles Coughlin

The public career of Father Charles Coughlin is reasonably well known, at least in its basic outlines. A portion of Donald Warren's book is thus a twice-told tale. But Warren looks to break new ground in two important ways. His first goal is to document Coughlin's connections to fascist movements in the Western Hemisphere and Europe, up to and including the priest's receipt of funds from the Nazi government. He also wants to establish Coughlin, in an American political context, as the principal progenitor of present-day "hate radio." Given the inherent difficulties, he is surprisingly successful at the former endeavor. He is less persuasive when it comes to the latter.

The book is organized for the most part chronologically. Warren opens with a brief survey of Coughlin's childhood and his early years as a Basilian, and later a diocesan, priest. Some new information is offered here: Coughlin is alleged to have informed on fellow clergy to ecclesiastical superiors and to have been deeply disliked and distrusted by many priests as a result. Subsequent chapters allege that Coughlin was an inveterate womanizer. These various assertions about Coughlin's personal life, however, are based solely—and troublingly—on oral evidence. Historians must sometimes rely on such, and Warren has interviewed an admirably wide array of people with connections to the "radio priest." But he does not address the problems inherent in evidence of this sort—problems that are especially acute when the events in question are decades old and center on a notorious and famously duplicitous individual. This is the book's most serious weakness: readers will find they are

simply unable to evaluate the reliability of Warren's oral sources. We learn nothing of their ages or physical conditions, nothing about their personalities or politics or the circumstances in which they were interviewed, and in some cases nothing about the nature of their relationship to Coughlin—something that is not necessarily evident when the informant is a fellow priest or parishioner.

Fortunately, the book also rests on formidable research in both American and European archives. If Warren has not unraveled the mysteries of Coughlin's personality and private life, he has shed significant new light on the priest's political career. This is especially true with regard to that career's most controversial phase, from 1938 until Coughlin's virtual silencing in 1942, when the priest was openly and virulently antisemitic. Warren has new information too on the earlier stages of Coughlin's public life: the man who emerges in the first third of the book bears little resemblance to the quasi-populist Coughlin of Alan Brinkley's *Voices of Protest*.^[1] Warren finds no credible evidence for Coughlin's famous claim that the Klan burned a cross at his Royal Oak church in 1926. (Warren is in this instance appropriately critical of oral testimony; the incident is still the stuff of legend in Catholic Detroit.) He links Coughlin by the mid-1930s to an emerging "international network of monetary reformers who made effective use of the new mass medium of radio" (p. 98). Not all of these reformers were antisemitic or sympathetic to fascism, but some of them certainly were. Perhaps most important, Warren has discovered that Coughlin wrote to Mussolini in 1933, seeking his support for currency reform on an international scale.

The overture was rejected—Coughlin was even in 1933 too controversial a figure for image-conscious Italian fascists. But Italian consular officials in the United States kept a close and generally appreciative eye on Coughlin's career in the early to mid-1930s, and kept their Roman superiors abreast of his activities. Warren also claims that Coughlin "kept in close touch with the Italian consul in Detroit," and, though this seems plausible in the circumstances, he offers no evidence for this particular assertion (p. 109).

Warren seems personally convinced that the "early" Coughlin was already the virulent antisemite and full-blown fascist sympathizer who emerged into public view in 1938. His position makes a certain intuitive sense, despite what Warren concedes was relative rhetorical restraint on the early Coughlin's part when it came to Jews: "As a media personality, the radio priest touched on a variety of themes initially, seldom dwelling in any direct or specific manner on the issue of Jewish power or subversion" (p. 132). Much of Warren's case, however, rests on guilt by association: he has established that Coughlin had more extensive contacts with antisemites and pro-fascists than most historians have hitherto realized, but he has not necessarily established more than this. Even the priest's abortive efforts to contact Mussolini are open to a relatively benign interpretation, given support (even admiration) for the dictator among mainstream politicians and opinion-makers prior to the invasion of Ethiopia. Still, Warren's version of the "early" Coughlin makes the later stages of the man's career more explicable than they have typically been at the hands of historians who see a radical shift in the priest's mentality by 1938. And his evidence certainly challenges Brinkley's assertion that, as of the mid-1930s, Coughlin neither "openly approved of fascism or maintained any meaningful connection with fascist movements or thinkers."^[2]

Warren's chapters on the "later" Coughlin are the most important in the book. They are also the most frustrating. He presents suggestive new evidence, some of it from oral sources, bearing on Coughlin's contacts with European fascists. He strengthens the case for Coughlin's close connection to Christian Front groups and activities on the East Coast. Using FBI files and German government archives, he argues persuasively that Coughlin himself received indirect funding from Nazi sources and that Louis Ward, the priest's good friend and sometime employee, got generous funding from the Japanese government from 1938 through 1940. These are important contributions to the on-going debate about the scope and meaning of Coughlin's career. But the narrative in this portion of the book is on occasion hard to

follow, and Warren is sometimes careless when it comes to distinguishing between established fact with regard to the priest and speculation or even unsubstantiated rumor. Is there any credible evidence linking Coughlin to the Silver Shirts in Mexico, or to an alleged plot to invade that country with an American civilian militia? Warren's footnotes suggest there is not, but his text could be read as implying otherwise. When and under what circumstances did Coughlin meet in England with Sir Oswald Mosely? (Warren's 1991 interview with Mosely's widow is the principal source of information about these meetings.) We are eventually told that Coughlin was in England in the fall of 1937, but the dates of a subsequent visit—and presumably of a second meeting with Mosely—remain a mystery.

Nor does Warren deal in this section of the book with the important fact of Coughlin's dwindling and increasingly marginal audience, though he does earlier address the question. The dwindling audience does not make Coughlin at this stage of his career any less reprehensible. But it provides grounds on which to argue that Coughlin at his most extreme was less dangerous than he was at his most moderate zenith. Warren does not believe this, and for good reason. His speculations about "the frightening reach of Coughlin's oratory," however, are rather undermined by his failure at this point in the book to analyze Coughlin's audience (p. 187). The potential of antisemitism for galvanizing America's dispossessed is too important (and unfortunately, too relevant) a topic to treat with anything less than precision. It matters that Coughlin's extremism alienated a substantial portion of his audience. We also need to know, as best we can, just who remained in his camp.

Beyond the topics already mentioned, Warren's book deals variously with Coughlin's relations to his ecclesiastical superiors, the debate within the Roosevelt administration over indicting him for sedition, and the final, "post-silencing" phase of his career. Warren makes use of recently opened files in the archives of the Archdiocese of Detroit to explore the first-named of these issues. I have worked with the same sources, and regard his analysis as balanced and fair. He does an equally good job with the debate over trying Coughlin for sedition, the resolution of which eventually involved Archbishop Edward Mooney of Detroit. The survey of Coughlin's "post-silencing" years is necessarily sketchy, and suffers to some extent from a certain tone-deafness with regard to American Catholic culture. (This last is a minor criticism, given the focus and purpose of Warren's book.)

Finally, Warren argues in episodic fashion for Coughlin's role as the progenitor of present-day "hate radio" and, via "televangelism," of the Christian Right. He is often perceptive in this regard. But the story he tells is too simple. Conservative Protestant evangelists by the late 1930s had already discovered the uses of radio, and they were heirs to a long tradition of fusing religion and politics. Had Coughlin not existed, it seems fair to say, both "hate radio" and politicized televangelism would still today be part of the American scene.

None of my criticism should be read as minimizing the importance of Warren's book. He has brought significant new information to light about Coughlin's career and, by extension, about the history of right-wing pol-

itics in the twentieth century. Whatever its shortcomings, this is a book to which historians of modern America should pay attention.

Notes:

[1]. Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin and the Great Depression* (New York: Random House, 1982).

[2]. Brinkley, *Voices of Protest*, p. 276.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-antisemitism>

Citation: Leslie Woodcock Tentler. Review of Warren, Donald, *Charles Coughlin: The Father of Hate Radio*. H-Antisemitism, H-Net Reviews. April, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=961>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.