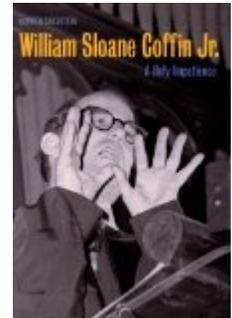


Warren Goldstein. *William Sloane Coffin Jr.: A Holy Impatience.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. xiii + 379 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-10221-5.



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It is safe to say that anyone who is interested in the fate of politically liberal Protestantism in the second half of twentieth-century America will be interested in William Sloane Coffin, Jr. Warren Goldstein's gracefully written biography of Coffin does something to answer the question of liberal Protestantism's fate in the decades after World War II. *William Sloane Coffin Jr.* is a biography of an important figure by a skilled historian genuinely interested in Coffin as an individual but also keenly aware of the context of Coffin's times.

In some ways the most compelling part of the story Goldstein tells is found in this book's early chapters, where Goldstein explains what an extraordinary early life Coffin had. He spent his first years in the true lap of luxury, part of an upper-crust Manhattan family enmeshed in the worlds of philanthropy, real estate and Christian service (they were Presbyterians). When William, Jr. was nine, in 1933, William, Sr. died suddenly and the family's life changed dramatically. Due to Depression-era troubles, their income from investments was modest and they had to husband their resources carefully. William, Jr., who became

known as Bill, his two siblings and their mother, Catherine, moved to Carmel, California where they lived for a time in an unassuming bungalow. The children attended public schools there. William Sloane Coffin, Sr.'s brother, Henry Sloane Coffin, who would become the president of Union Theological Seminary and would sit on the Yale Corporation, the small body that governed Yale University, maintained far greater wealth and became the benefactor to his dead brother's children, paying for elite private schooling as they reached their teenage years.

Bill Coffin displayed a number of talents early in his life, and his mother foresaw great things for him. His musical abilities were impressive, as was his aptitude for learning languages, and when he was fourteen Catherine Coffin arranged for her and Bill to spend the better part of two years alone in Paris and elsewhere in Europe so that Bill could devote himself exclusively to developing his skills on the piano. The boy practiced for hours every day, in an apartment with his mother; they went on excursions and Bill absorbed a great deal in terms of worldly knowledge and self-confi-

dence, but their personal world was a small one, inhabited by two people. Goldstein steps carefully in analyzing the relationship between mother and son, but he devotes sufficient space to quotations from their correspondence, continuing through Bill's twenties, to convey the depth and intimacy of their bond. Bill appears to have kept very little from Catherine; as a young man he seemed to tease her with affected world-weary renditions of his flirtations with young women, and she responded as a mentor in matters romantic. Possibly they thought this very European of them. Catherine's emotional hold on Bill was tight, and one can't help but think that their personal history laid the basis for the serial failures he later would experience in his relationships with women. Goldstein ventures some brief Freudian offerings in discussing the mother-son relationship, but he holds back. While I am by no means a confirmed Freudian, it might have been worthwhile to see a fuller development of Goldstein's speculations in this area.

World War II interrupted Bill Coffin's musical training and set him on a new course. He served in the army, attended Yale as an undergraduate, was employed by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in its early years during the Korean War and then returned to Yale, this time to the university's divinity school. One suspects that as little as five years before he began study for the ministry very few would have predicted that vocation for him. The particular uses that the army and the CIA made of him reflected both his language abilities and his remarkable social skills. The inevitable phrase here is "life of the party." He loved to lead sing-alongs in several languages while playing the piano or the guitar. He loved being in a group who were having great fun, and he could drink competitively (from what I understand, many people could in those days). In such settings he proved magnetic, and showed an ability to make fast friends with people from diverse backgrounds. He also reveled in vigorous physical exertion, throwing himself into sporting activities

(years later, while serving as Yale University chaplain, he took a leave to run a training camp in Puerto Rico for Peace Corps volunteers, which he turned into a version of army basic training). He appeared as a stereotypical "man's man." Those who know of him only from his later life might be surprised by the powerful, rugged visual image projected by the photographs, included in this book, of Coffin's young adult self.

Coffin was a youthful cold warrior. He developed extensive contacts with "White Russian" communities in France and elsewhere, exiles from the Soviet regime, and as a CIA employee he trained anti-Soviet agents who were parachuted into the Soviet Union (it failed badly; the men were caught). He was always haunted by his actions just after World War II, when he had helped to repatriate Soviet prisoners of war back to the USSR. They hadn't wanted to go, fearing both the general terrors of life under Stalin and specifically that they would be treated as collaborators with the enemy--as some of them were--and thus imprisoned, tortured and killed. In earlier repatriation episodes, prior to Coffin's involvement, there had been terrible scenes, including riots and suicides. When Coffin had come to the task, he had sought to obscure or deny what was planned in order to gain the prisoners' trust. His CIA service was meant to expiate his feelings of guilt.

During the Vietnam War, when Coffin became famous as a war opponent and a protector of draft resisters, many would have been surprised to learn of his earlier experiences in Europe. Starting in the late 1960s his views on foreign policy and international relations did move to the left. He did not present his antiwar views as those of a cold war "realist"--one who, like the political theorist Hans Morgenthau, did not need to reconsider his political framework in order to oppose the Vietnam War. But, as we will see, Coffin did frame his objections to the war cautiously. His turn to the left seemed to have little to do with a softening of his views on the Soviet Union. He sug-

gested that he saw himself protecting young men who didn't want to go to Vietnam in the way that he wished he could have protected the men who hadn't wanted to go back to the USSR.

Having gotten "turned on" to religion in part by hearing Reinhold Niebuhr and other Protestant ministers speak during his time at Yale in the late 1940s, Coffin entered ministerial study with his customary zeal. Given his family connections and his personal qualities, he was marked out for very nice positions. He served a short time as Williams College chaplain before being hired at Yale in 1958. He seems to have enjoyed his pastoral counseling--although, as Goldstein explains, it proved a serious challenge to him when he began seeing women as well as men as undergraduates starting at the end of the 1960s. Coffin had spent a large part of his formative years at Yale, and had come to know it, like most of the other settings where he excelled, as very much a male environment. Coffin first came to national attention in 1961 when he was one of a small group of highly "respectable" northeastern academics, most of them white, who joined the Freedom Rides initiated by the Congress of Racial Equality to defy and protest the racial segregation of interstate bus lines and travel facilities. Coffin's friend John Maguire knew Martin Luther King, Jr. and King and Maguire had discussed the role that white liberals such as Maguire might play in the civil rights movement; Maguire and Coffin decided to fly south when the Freedom Rides seemed imperiled. Burke Marshall, a former Yale Law School professor then serving in the Kennedy justice department, got wind of the plan and called Coffin to tell him to drop the idea; but Coffin went to the law school dean, Eugene Rostow, who gave him his blessing.

The group joined King and Ralph Abernathy in Alabama and got arrested. Coffin, the Yale chaplain who cut an impressive figure and quickly figured out how to communicate through reporters and television cameras, immediately re-

ceived loads of attention from the print media and got his first opportunity to write about his experiences and views for a national public. These would become regular activities for him for a quarter of a century. He had become an early "movement celebrity," but he also had become morally serious almost without anyone noticing. By the late 1950s it was not unusual for northern white Protestant clergy and activists to feel strongly about civil rights in the South. What was unusual was that Coffin and his friends, with no prior activist involvement or organizational links to protest groups, simply decided to insert themselves into this momentous public drama. Coffin joined the Freedom Rides because he felt, without reflecting on this, that it mattered what he did. But he went also because he had taken his religious training seriously. He saw no excuse for not joining in the fray. It was the sixties.

At this point the die was cast for his career. Burke Marshall had suggested to Coffin that Coffin might have a useful role to play in the future as a member of the nation's governing establishment, and it seems plausible that Coffin could have chosen that path. The personal calculus that resulted in his choice to take the other fork in the road, to become a kind of "outsider"--always speaking from within the precincts of privilege, but consistently speaking for society's progressive dissenters and for those truly on the outside--remains obscure. But it clearly was a choice. Coffin's biography up to the time he was hired at Yale reads like the life story of a man destined for power. Things turned out differently. He had influence and authority of a kind. But, in a religious mode, he proved more drawn to the role of prophet than to that of courtier.

Having embraced an activist, protest identity, Coffin moved easily from the cause of civil rights to the arena of foreign policy during the 1960s. He clearly was uneasy about Lyndon Johnson's escalation of the Vietnam War in 1965, but he moved slowly and carefully toward a stance of opposi-

tion, never getting far in front of his chosen peer group of genteel intellectual dissenters. In summer 1965 he took the lead in forming Americans for Reappraisal of Far Eastern Policy (ARFEP), securing the involvement of individuals such as John King Fairbank, John Hersey and Roger Baldwin. The group initially focused on urging U.S. diplomatic recognition of the People's Republic of China, a timely but oblique way of approaching the Vietnam issue. Coffin couldn't avoid addressing the war itself for long, but ARFEP took a cautious line, keeping its distance from antiwar protests and certainly from civil disobedience. Coffin in fall 1965 said to an associate, "I think we have got to keep going, or nobody right of SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] will be opposing the President" (p. 157), using the new left as a foil to position himself as part of the "responsible" opposition.

Coffin's caution continued for some time. Reportedly he preached a sermon in spring 1965 in which he said Vietnam "is an issue on which Christians can sincerely differ and in which there will be Christian arguments on either side" (p. 151). Today there are many Americans who no doubt would agree that Christian arguments can be found to justify, in retrospect, the escalation and continuation of the U.S. war in Vietnam circa 1965. Yet those Americans surely would be located on the Christian right. From the political and moral position that Coffin had staked out for himself by 1965, this was a statement understandable only as an expression of political calculation, conscious or unconscious. He hoped to influence policymakers, or he hoped to influence establishment Americans who would have been offended by a forthright judgment of the war in terms of the religious ethics in which Coffin was expert. In early 1966 Coffin still didn't advocate U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. That "would be to betray an obligation to people we have promised to defend, to prove our commitments a paper tiger, and to give the green light to the National Liberation Movement in Thailand and elsewhere," he said from

the pulpit (p. 165). Still he spoke as a cold war apostle. (The parallels to "respectable" and "responsible" discussion of U.S. forces currently in Iraq are, I think, too obvious for me to belabor.)

As is well known, by 1968 Coffin had assumed a different role in the debate over the war, counseling Yale students to consider all their options regarding the draft and supporting draft resistance. Coffin became a true household name when he, Dr. Benjamin Spock and others were arrested and put on trial for allegedly encouraging unlawful behavior. They were convicted but the government dropped the charges after an appeal was filed. Coffin's name became inextricably linked to anti-draft protests. Like many other liberals who had sought to straddle a widening gap between pro- and antiwar camps while Johnson had been in office, Coffin felt liberated to oppose the war wholeheartedly after Richard Nixon became president. At this point Coffin embraced the antiwar, peace and (to a somewhat lesser extent) anti-imperialist movements, and as the political environment in America shifted to the right in the 1970s and 1980s he embraced the role of protest theologian, hewing to it for the rest of his career.

As for theology itself, Goldstein doesn't emphasize it but he shows a good ear for Coffin's role as a religious leader. Amid the theological and worship innovations of the 1960s, "Coffin remained theologically and liturgically orthodox." He was not one for guitar services. He stuck with traditional bible explications and classical music. Goldstein writes that "Coffin, unlike the Berrigan brothers or Episcopal Bishop James Pike, drew little inspiration from the cultural phenomena of 'the sixties'" (p. 223). He "had little feel for 1960s counterculture. He never advocated 'free love'; he never adopted the reflexive anti-Americanism of many of the young people; and he never learned anything about rock music. What did engage Coffin from the 1960s was the culture of publicity and celebrity" (p. 331). This last discerning comment comes from Goldstein's well-turned conclud-

ing chapter, in itself a fine essay on Coffin's life and work. Goldstein notes correctly that Coffin played a role in the 1960s revival of the social gospel, embracing a gospel of love well suited to an activist and egalitarian era. Niebuhr inspired Coffin, but the neo-orthodoxy associated with Niebuhr always was a more effective vehicle of critique than of change, and in religious terms Coffin had to turn in another direction to do the work he wished to do. Even King, whom Coffin followed as a religious thinker, persisted more than did Coffin in upholding the importance of Niebuhrian sentiments. But, as Goldstein recognizes, these alternatives had nothing to do with religious experimentation or relaxation of disciplined biblical fidelity. He quotes Rabbi Arnold Wolf's remark that "the usual image of Bill Coffin is a political radical of international importance and something of a phony Christian pastor," but "both of those assessments are wrong. Politically I think he was ... courageous in a personal way, but not particularly vanguard or unusual.... But as a Christian pastor I always found him wonderful. He was a real preacher" (p. 333).

Coffin's traditionalist worship tendencies helped him in cultivating senior figures at Yale and in mending his fences with the university president in particular. These tasks he performed like a virtuoso. His relations with Kingman Brewster, Yale president during most of Coffin's time as chaplain there, provide many fascinating moments in this biography. Brewster comes off particularly well in this account. The president of one of the nation's most eminent universities, with powerful and often conservative alumni to placate, he defended Coffin down the line as a person doing his job responsibly and very well. At one point Brewster publicly rebuked Coffin for his behavior in the draft-protest matter, but Goldstein suggests persuasively that this was part of a complex dance that Brewster performed; he was never really alienated from Coffin. This is not to say that Brewster did not truly disagree with what Coffin did. A skilled lawyer, he always parsed his

position carefully. But Brewster saw it as Coffin's duty to challenge Yale students from a sound religious and moral perspective and he saw it as his own duty to protect his chaplain politically so that the chaplain could fulfill that role. Showing that he was willing on occasion to criticize Coffin made it easier for Brewster to protect Coffin, as he always did at difficult moments. Perhaps the private correspondence of today's university presidents will show them, one day, to have been as impressive as Brewster appears here. But I'm not getting my hopes up.

Eventually Coffin burned out in his job and left Yale, and in 1977 he was hired as senior minister at New York's prestigious and sprawling Riverside Church, where he served for a decade. He became closely associated with anti-nuclear activism and other left-liberal causes during his time there. Starting in 1985 Coffin spoke out strongly in favor of the equality of homosexuals to heterosexuals in Christian terms. He said there was no reason to import biblical prohibitions against homosexuality into the modern age, any more than numerous other biblical laws that were ignored as belonging strictly to ancient times. Goldstein comments, "Coffin spoke with more theological certainty on homosexuality than he had on Vietnam" (p. 319). He averred, as he had not in the late 1960s regarding Vietnam, that the basic issue involved was simple and one that Christians who understood their religion's message correctly couldn't reasonably disagree about. It was simply that gays were humans and their love was equal to anyone else's. Coffin positioned himself in the forefront of the tide of acceptance that was beginning to roll across the "mainline" Protestant churches--which by this time meant the more liberal Protestant churches--in America. Clearly this issue remains a point of fierce conflict even within many of those churches today.

Goldstein had Coffin's cooperation in preparing this biography and it is to the credit of both historian and subject that this book renders Cof-

fin's private failings in such detail and with so few excuses. As Goldstein writes bluntly, "Coffin was a marital disaster" (p. 323). It took him two broken marriages to get to a third, successful one. Even his third marriage seems to have worked primarily because Coffin's wife, Randy, was so willing to accommodate herself to his habits and needs, not because Coffin changed much as a person. The first two times, he married in apparent haste and badly. He had no interest in caring for his children or maintaining himself and his household in any way, always assuming someone else would do these things for him; some may read this and think this refers only to stereotypical male neglect of household chores, but it was much worse than that. Large areas of his interior life were a shambles. He had almost no capacity for emotional intimacy with his wives. He was at least once unfaithful to his first wife, Eva, but that is almost a footnote. According to this account, he drove her to far more affairs than he had. "Coffin's intimate life has possessed a striking consistency over many decades," Goldstein explains. "The simplest way to put it is to say that he did not have much of one.... Coffin never developed the knack of reflection and self-exploration. His focus on productive engagement with the exterior world absorbed nearly all of his emotional and physical energy. He loved pursuing women and the social whirl of life lived intensely but never knew what to do when the music stopped" (p. 324). His second wife, Harriet, he married because he was lonely and needed someone to look after his children; none of it worked out well. Harriet developed a bad drinking problem and interests in psychology and feminism, and Bill didn't take to any of that. Harriet became desperately unhappy and tried to force Bill into discussing matters he preferred to avoid. They had George-and-Martha scenes. On two especially ugly occasions, with Harriet drunk and Bill unable to escape her (literally) or cope with her, he hit her, once injuring her badly.

Goldstein's biography gives the life in full of a person of significant, if not enormous, influence.

Now that he has died we can try to view his deeds and character in a fuller perspective. Coffin's career charts the path of the liberal northern Protestant clerical intelligentsia during the cold war. Coffin was able to exert some influence on the establishment, particularly on their youth, in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when that establishment retained much of its traditional sway in society and culture yet was opening itself to new perspectives and challenges. That time would not last very long. Eventually Coffin provided national leadership to the fragment of American Christians who pursued peace and social justice as Christians. But this fragment of Christianity found itself increasingly disempowered and out of step with the overall direction of the Christian churches, whose vital, rapidly growing segments lay on the right in the 1970s and afterward. Coffin was a person of his time.

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