

Nazis of Copley Square. The forgotten story of the Christian Front. By Charles R. Gallagher.

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In this extraordinarily well crafted and narrated book, Charles R. Gallagher chronicles the history of the Christian Front, a militant Catholic organisation that sought to enact its antisemitic and anti-Communist vision in American society. While the subtitle suggests a ‘forgotten story’, Gallagher acknowledges that other scholars have examined the Christian Front. What is new, however, is Gallagher’s persuasive argument that the organisation was built on a ‘genuinely Catholic philosophy’ (p. 2). It was grounded in key theological tenets of the early twentieth century. This fact has been obscured by the efforts of ‘the highest reaches of the US Catholic hierarchy’ at the time to ‘downplay the group’s violence and anti-Semitism’ and to distinguish its message from Catholicism (p. 53). Nevertheless, Gallagher convincingly argues that ‘everything the front did ... had everything to do with religion’ (p. 3).

Specifically, Gallagher highlights two popular strands of Catholic theology. First, belief in the mystical body of Christ meant that American Catholics keenly felt the suffering of coreligionists in Communist countries. This sympathy linked with widespread Judeo-Bolshevism, which erroneously conflated Communism with Judaism. Catholics became ‘certain that defending the Mystical Body against Communism necessitated combatting Jews’ (p. 9). Concurrently, the theology of Catholic Action encouraged laity to act in the name of the Church with approval from some authority. This allowed a militant organisation to speak on behalf of Catholicism so long as it received the endorsement of some priest or bishop.

Gallagher deftly examines how these theological ideas built the Christian Front. A British convert to Catholicism, Arnold Lunn, initially envisioned an ecumenical body committed to combatting Communist persecution. The demagogue radio priest Charles Coughlin brought Lunn’s idea to the United States but reconceived the Christian Front solely as a Catholic group. More significantly, Coughlin explicitly labelled ‘Communism as the work of Judeo-Bolshevists’ (p. 29). The Front first took form in a band of revolutionaries around New York, who plotted to overthrow the US government and eliminate imagined Jewish influence. Though the group melded ‘the Judeo-Bolshevik myth and a Roman Catholicism already suspicious of Jews’, when its members were arrested both they and church leaders denied the Catholic foundations (p. 40). Their trial, at which they were acquitted, was designed to convey the impression that the Christian Front ‘had nothing to do with religion’ (p. 53).

Where the New York revolutionaries failed, a one-time seminarian in Boston nearly succeeded. The eventual focus of Gallagher’s book is Francis Moran, who maintained the Christian Front’s antisemitic, anti-Communist message, but minimised calls to revolutionary violence. Moran’s efforts attracted the support of the Nazi spy Herbert Wilhelm Scholz, and Moran increasingly espoused unadulterated Nazi propaganda. Despite efforts by law enforcement officials, politicians and the Catholic activist Frances Sweeney (who was herself encouraged by British intelligence), Moran’s organising went largely unchecked. Even when he was forced out of the public eye during World War II, Moran fomented an environment that produced a wave of anti-Jewish violence.

Throughout *Nazis of Copley Square*, Gallagher persuasively makes an important argument about how theology contributed to the Christian Front world view. Gallagher consistently demonstrates that his actors invoked ‘a theology not only permitting violence’ against Jews ‘but compelling it’ (p. 46).

Gallagher’s emphasis on theology allows a fuller assessment of the perspective of Catholics like Moran, whose theological outlook departed from Nazi ideology on crucial points. Christian Front leaders did not simply echo their Nazi allies. Catholicism taught that ‘all people could be saved by joining Christ’s body’, a position in stark contrast with Hitler’s racialised thought (p. 139). In practice, this seems a distinction without a difference, though Gallagher is still right to note it. Moran ‘compromised with Nazism because he thought it was the right thing for a Christian to do in light of the Judeo-Bolshevist threat’ and because of his conviction that Communism represented the greater threat (p. 121). The front’s goals are starkly revealed in what theological ideas they prioritised.

Gallagher offers another important insight by suggesting that theology explains why historians have failed to grasp the Christian Front’s significance. With its two-pronged foundation ‘of Catholic Action and Mystical Body theology both distant memories, Catholics today lack the intellectual grounding to make sense of this Christian Front’ (p. 12). This is perhaps overstated – this book demonstrates how modern readers can make sense of the group’s ideas – but the overall point has merit. Historical distance from popular theological concepts renders them less comprehensible. This, in turn, makes it harder to understand the world views of the people guided by those theologies. Gallagher makes this argument to good effect, which might be the book’s most widely applicable contribution.

The rich discussion of theology early in the book makes its relative absence in later chapters disappointing. Gallagher’s shift in focus makes sense to a point. As Moran came under the influence of Hitler’s agent Scholz, he increasingly expressed pure Nazi propaganda and left it to associates to make occasional nods to Catholic theology. But Moran’s nemesis, Frances Sweeney, was also inspired by an interpretation of Catholic theology, though one that inspired ‘a more universal kind of justice’ (p. 196). Yet, the nature and origins of her theological views receive less attention. While this is excusable given her limited role in the book, Gallagher’s quick dismissal of personalism as ‘a complex of views, full of nuance and driving toward diverse conclusions’ is more problematic (p. 140). Gallagher is right that personalism eludes easy definition. But he is also correct about its central place in Catholic ideas about human rights, which distinguished members of the Christian Front from their Nazi allies. Additional engagement with personalism would have provided some needed discussion of countervailing ideas that complicated the claims of the Christian Front.

Nevertheless, Gallagher has produced a masterful work in its analysis of the theological roots of an organisation that threatened great political and social harm. This book provides a timely, important reminder of the wider effects religious ideas can have in public life.

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