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Too Little Too Late

Catholic Americans and the Response to the
Holocaust, 1933-1945

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College of the City University of New York

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Michael Gentils
CCNY MA Thesis
Dr. Craig Daigle

*Too Little Too Late: Catholic Americans and the Response to the Holocaust
1933-1945*

In “The Practical Personalism of the Catholic Worker and the Pragmatic Policies of the New Deal,” historian Francis Sicius claims, rather flippantly, that by the 1930s “it was clear to most [American Catholics] that Hitler’s fascist state represented the most horrible threat to civilization in human memory.”¹ However, many Holocaust historians have reported on the widespread American disbelief of Hitler’s war against the Jews and the seriousness of the surfacing reports of genocide well into the 1930s.² Were the Nazis uniformly regarded as “the most horrible threat to civilization in human memory” by Catholics in the 1930s? Using four prominent American Catholic newspapers - *Social Justice*, the *Tablet*, *Commonweal*, and *America*, I will argue that American Catholics were more than aware of the issues facing Jews in Europe as early as 1933. Their refusal to take this threat seriously, in spite of mounting evidence to the contrary, ultimately resulted in a lackluster - at best - response to one of the most hideous crimes of the 20th century. By 1943, when American Catholics finally realized the true threat Hitler posed to the survival of Jews worldwide, millions of Jews had already been murdered and millions more were on their way to death camps across Poland. By that point, all American Catholics could do was watch in horror as Allied forces liberated camps and were presented with unthinkable crimes against humanity.

¹ Francis Sicius. “The Practical Personalism of the Catholic Worker and the Pragmatic Policies of the New Deal,” in *FDR, the Vatican, and the Roman Catholic Church in America, 1933-1945*, ed. David B. Woolner and Richard G. Kurial, (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 122.

² Robert F. Drinan, “The Christian Response to the Holocaust,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 450 (1980) and Deborah Lipstadt, “America and the Holocaust,” *Modern Judaism* 10 (1990).

Of course, it is first important to discuss why any of this matters. What role did the American Catholic press play in the larger narrative of the Holocaust? Regardless of what American Catholic writers felt and wrote about the Holocaust, would anything have changed for the Jews in Europe? Deborah Lipstadt, in *Beyond Belief: The American Press & the Coming of the Holocaust*,³ Robert W. Ross in *So it Was True: The American Protestant Press and the Nazi Persecution of the Jews*,⁴ provide convincing arguments in this area. To Lipstadt, “the press was the conduit of information to the public,” and it was directly responsible for influencing not what the people think, but what they think about. Additionally, Lipstadt argues, quite convincingly, that the press is not a narrator, but rather an actor: “The press became part of the historical process by virtue of the role it played as conduit of information. Just by fulfilling its task, it became a catalyst.”⁵ Ross generally agrees, adding the idea that if American’s were informed of Hitler’s genocidal intentions, then the blame for a lack of response lies with the people. However, if the press failed to adequately report on this threat, then the people receive a pardon.⁶ While Lipstadt focuses on the American press in general, and Ross focuses solely on the Protestant press, both outline specifically and convincingly the importance of the press in determining not only what Americans knew, but also how the information was presented to them.

The four papers chosen for this paper were written by Catholics, for Catholics, and so they reveal not only what Catholics were reading, but also what Catholics were writing and feeling about the persecution of Jews in Europe. Thus, the reaction of the American Catholic

³ Deborah Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief: The American Press & The Coming of the Holocaust* (New York: The Free Press, 1986).

⁴ Robert W. Ross, *So It Was True: The American Protestant Press and the Nazi Persecution of the Jews* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980).

⁵ Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 2.

⁶ Ross, *So It Was True*, XI.

press, if it had been greater, would have changed not only what American Catholics thought about the Holocaust, but also how they acted regarding the Holocaust. While it would be hard to argue that a more responsible reaction to the Holocaust by the American Catholic press would have stopped genocide, it is certainly reasonable to wonder whether or not more Jews would have been saved, or if American Catholics would have pressured the Vatican to intercede more on the behalf of European Jews.

Additionally, in a study of this nature, questions of motive are sure to arise. If it is true that American Catholics failed to respond adequately to genocide, then it is natural to wonder why. Two possibilities exist, with one being considerably more cynical than the other. Of course, it is possible that American Catholics simply misunderstood the severity of anti-Semitism in Europe, and thus chose not to focus their attention on it as much as they should have. However, a much more cynical, and perhaps more realistic possibility exists. As will be shown, American Catholics spent a tremendous amount of time and energy actively petitioning against the idea that anti-Semitism in Europe was worse than anti-Catholicism. This leads to the possibility that the Catholic press understood how severe the situation was for Jews, yet aggressively denied it to their readers in order to garner support for Catholic issues. There is nothing wrong, of course, with a Catholic newspaper focusing on Catholic issues. There is something terribly immoral, however, with denying the severity of genocide in order to gain support for a different issue. It seems that this may have been the case for American Catholics.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

The topic of American Catholics and their reaction to Hitler's regime in Germany has been under-researched by both American and European historians. Much of the research on the topic falls into a number of important yet somewhat lacking categories. While each adds a vital piece to the historiographical puzzle, none attempt to completely analyze the reaction of the individual American Catholics to Adolf Hitler and the treatment of the Jews in Europe.

A large portion of the historiography focuses on the history of the Catholic Church in Germany during Hitler's reign, typified by a Susan Zuccotti's fantastic *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy*.⁷ The second topic details the Catholic response to the Holocaust generally, as is done by Michael Phayer in *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*⁸ which analyzes the reaction of Catholics worldwide to the crisis of the Holocaust. Third, historians have researched and written about the American reaction to the Holocaust. Perhaps the best work in this vein is David Wyman's *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945*.⁹ Finally, historians, led by Lipstadt's *Beyond Belief*, have analyzed the response of the American press to the rise of Nazism in Germany.

While none of these works specifically analyze the reaction of the American Catholics to the treatment of the Jews, a common thread seems to emerge. To these historians, newspapers like *Commonweal* and *America* represent the only Catholic publications to speak out against Jewish atrocities, while the rest, typified most commonly by Father Coughlin's *Social Justice* and the Brooklyn *Tablet*, remained silent and even supported Hitler to an extent. This

⁷ Susan Zuccotti, *Under His Very Windows: The Vatican and the Holocaust in Italy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).

⁸ Michael Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust, 1930-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

⁹ David S. Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews: America and the Holocaust 1941-1945* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

oversimplified duality can be found in even the most thoroughly researched works, including but not limited to those mentioned above.

Perhaps the most infamous American Catholic during the 1930s and 1940s is Father Coughlin, a Detroit priest who exploited numerous media outlets in order to spread his message of anti-Communism and anti-Semitism. Donald Warren does an excellent job of exploring Coughlin's anti-Semitism in his book *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin the Father of Hate Radio*.¹⁰ Warren's research is primarily based on Coughlin's public speeches and his infamous radio addresses, but he spends considerable time exploring the pages of Coughlin's monthly Catholic newspaper, *Social Justice*. While Warren's work is definitely the most thorough on Coughlin and his anti-Semitism, the historiography is certainly ripe with discussion of Coughlin and his views.¹¹ Coughlin and the pages of *Social Justice* make up much more of the historiography than the *Tablet*, but historians have often linked the latter with the anti-Semitic views espoused in Coughlin's influential newspaper and radio broadcasts.¹²

While it becomes clear upon further investigation of the historiography that *Social Justice* and the *Tablet* are widely considered purveyors of anti-Semitism in the American Catholic community, what also becomes obvious is that historians consider *Commonweal* and *America* to be the exact opposite. David Wyman, who considered Coughlin and Hitler as equally immoral, argues that *America* and *Commonweal* spoke out from time to time against the extermination of the Jews "and called for action to help them," while also declaring that *Commonweal* was

¹⁰ Donald Warren, *Radio Priest: Charles Coughlin, the Father of Hate Radio* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

¹¹ Robert H. Abzug, ed., *America Views the Holocaust: A Brief Documentary History* (New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 77, and Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, 17, and Charles R. Gallagher. "A Peculiar Brand of Patriotism: The Holy See, FDR, and the Case of Reverend Charles E. Coughlin," in *FDR, the Vatican, and the Roman Catholic Church in America, 1933-1945*, ed. David B. Woolner and Richard G. Kurial, (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 269.

¹² Donald Warren, *Radio Priest*, 197, and Charles R. Gallagher, "A Peculiar Brand of Patriotism," 273.

“among the few American Christian voices to speak.”¹³ Michael Phayer agrees, and he too labels the two Catholic publications as beacons of good in a time when too few American Catholics were speaking out against Nazi atrocities.¹⁴ The examples continue as most historians who have written about the American, Catholic, or press’ response to the Holocaust provide similar praises. Warren refers to *Commonweal* as more liberal than other magazines;¹⁵ Lipstadt contends that it was a voice of reform regarding the treatment of Jews;¹⁶ Philip Chen has commended *Commonweal* for labeling Hitler as enemy number one in 1941;¹⁷ and Robert Ross, in his coverage of the Protestant press’ reaction to Nazism, exalts *Commonweal* for reporting on Jewish persecution before other Christian publications.¹⁸

While many argue that some American Catholics (most notably those in *America* and *Commonweal*), petitioned on behalf of suffering Jews, no historians provide any empirical evidence in their texts, while only Wyman and Lipstadt provide citations with specific articles to support their comments. Herein lies the problem: the idea that *Commonweal* and *America* represent the liberal Catholic press while *Social Justice* and to a lesser extent the *Tablet* represent the conservative pro-Hitler movement during the 1930s and 1940s has been so easily accepted without any convincing empirical data. This leads to a belief that while some American Catholics were anti-Semitic and silent regarding Jewish persecution, many took up the fight against persecution and lobbied for Jewish support. This idea, as I will show, is extremely inaccurate.

¹³ Wyman, *The Abandonment of the Jews*, 64, 319.

¹⁴ Phayer, *The Catholic Church and the Holocaust*, 12.

¹⁵ Warren, *Radio Priest*, 107.

¹⁶ Deborah Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 114.

¹⁷ Philip Chen. “Religious Liberty in American Foreign Policy, 1933-1941: Aspects of Public Argument Between FDR and American Roman Catholics,” in *FDR, the Vatican, and the Roman Catholic Church in America, 1933-1945*, ed. David B. Woolner and Richard G. Kurial, (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 134.

¹⁸ Ross, *So It Was True*, 11.

THE SOURCES

When analyzing the American Catholic press as a conduit to the American Catholic social conscience, the four newspapers presented in this paper were chosen deliberately. *Social Justice*, the *Tablet*, *Commonweal*, and *America* are not only the most commonly read by Catholics, but they also make up a representative sample of the American Catholic press, both in size and type. *Social Justice*, published by the infamously anti-Communist priest Father Charles Coughlin, was in print from 1936 to 1942, and it was distributed to the members of Coughlin's church, National Shrine of the Little Flower, with a circulation upwards of 200,000. In addition to news and editorials, the paper published Coughlin's radio addresses, which boasted millions of weekly listeners for the better part of the 1930s and early 1940s. Of all the newspapers covered in this thesis, *Social Justice* is perhaps the most notorious, thanks to its infamous editor and publisher. The *Tablet*, the paper for the Diocese of Brooklyn, began publishing in 1908 and has continued since. Its editor during the years covered in this paper, Patrick Scanlan, has been criticized by historians for being overly supportive of Coughlin, even during Coughlin's anti-Semitic radio tirades. *America* began publication in 1909 in affiliation with American Jesuits. The paper has a history of publishing articles critical of the hierarchy of the Church, both on social and political issues. The paper is widely circulated and continues to be an extremely popular choice for American Catholics today. Finally, *Commonweal* is an independent Catholic magazine that dates back to 1924 and is circulated to tens of thousands of readers each week.

The newspapers chosen for this paper represent a number of demographics. First, *Social Justice* acts as a representative example of a paper published by a member of the clergy, yet independent from the views of the Catholic hierarchy. The *Tablet* is one of many small diocesan newspapers that Catholics received across America in the 1930s and 1940s. *America*, published

by the Jesuits, is a liberal-leaning national newspaper that has not been afraid to question the official viewpoints of the Catholic Church, both in America and in Rome. Finally, *Commonweal* is a liberal independent newspaper that was published without any influence from an official Church organization or sect. As a whole, these four papers present a representative, albeit not all-encompassing, view of what American Catholics thought about Jewish persecution before, during, and immediately following Hitler's mass murder of the Jews.

The questions asked in this thesis closely mirror, with some adjustments, the questions posed by Ross and Lipstadt in their works. I have separated the reaction into three important categories. First, I will analyze the reaction of American Catholics from 1933-1938, from Hitler's election to chancellorship to the events of November 9, 1938, the night of *Kristallnacht*. During this period, I will analyze how Catholics wrote about the persecution of Jews in Germany: *What was the outlook for the future of Jews in Germany and Europe?* To do this, I will analyze how American Catholics compared the suffering of Jews in Germany to the suffering of Catholics around the world and whether the Catholics actively argued in favor of Fascism or Communism, the two totalitarian forms of government that ruled the middle of the 20th century. Additionally, I will search for evidence of calls for help - that is, *did American Catholics actively encourage their readers or their government to help German Jews?* Finally, overt examples of Catholic anti-Semitism will provide further clarity to the issues presented above.

Secondly, I will discuss the response to *Kristallnacht*, perhaps the single most important event in the history of the Holocaust - at least in terms of a turning point, by American Catholics. After *Kristallnacht*, if not before, Hitler's intentions towards the Jews became painfully clear:

they were to be removed from the country, and violence was a viable method.¹⁹ I will simply analyze the tone of the Catholic reporting of these horrifying events. *Did Catholics treat Kristallnacht as a warning sign of genocide, or as simply another run-of-the-mill persecution? How did these horrible events affect the way American Catholics felt about Nazism and Jewish persecution in Germany?*

The final section of this thesis will analyze 1939-1945, the years of World War II. I will look to answer the same questions as in the first section (1933-1938) in an attempt to understand what, if any, shifts occurred in Catholic attitude towards Jewish persecution and Nazism. As more evidence of Jewish genocide reached American Catholics, did they feel an increased desire to intervene? Upon answering these questions, it should become clear not only what information American Catholics had at their disposal during Hitler's reign, but also why the American Catholic response to Jewish suffering was so subdued. Did American Catholics fail to adequately respond to Jewish persecution because they did not receive adequate information, or did anti-Semitism and a refusal to believe stifle any effective movement?

¹⁹ Hitler's decision to exterminate the Jews of Europe had not yet been made in 1939. Rather, the policy in Germany leading up to the outbreak of World War II in 1939 was to force Jews out of Germany using force, intimidation, crippling legislation, and eventually government sponsored acts of violence.

AMERICAN CATHOLICISM IN CONTEXT : 1933-1945

In order to fully understand the ramifications of how American Catholics reacted to the persecution of the Jews in Europe, it is first necessary to provide background on the influence and size of, as well as issues facing, the Catholic Church in the United States from 1933-1945. Understanding the issues of U.S. Catholics and their Church will hopefully shed light on not only what steps were taken to alleviate the suffering of Jews in Europe, but why these actions were implemented in the manner that they were.

First, it is important to understand the sheer size of the Catholic Church in the United States. By 1933, the Catholic Church was a significant force in U.S. society, and Roman Catholicism, as it is today, was the single largest denomination of the Christian faith in the United States. American Catholics were kept well informed of the actions of the Vatican and the European Church, and American Catholics often - but not always - considered themselves part of the greater worldwide Catholic community. According to Thomas Bokenkotter, a historian of Catholicism, "there were definite signs of an awakened Catholic social consciousness as the nation moved into the thirties."²⁰ This awakened social conscience coincided with a flurry of encyclicals, statements released by the Pope, which usually indicate an important issue in the Church. Between 1933 and 1945, Pope Pius XI published seven encyclicals, while his successor Pius XII published eight. These encyclicals were widely published in the American Catholic press, and Catholics in the United States were well aware of their scope and significance.

While not all fifteen encyclicals were relevant to the persecution of the Jews in Europe, a number were - both directly and indirectly. Much of this thesis will analyze how American Catholics viewed the persecution of the Jews in relation to the persecution of Catholics in Mexico, Spain, and Russia. Both Popes discussed these issues in encyclicals and in public

²⁰ Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, (Doubleday: New York, 1977), 378.

appearances. Pius XI's twenty-fifth encyclical, *Most Dear to Us*, given on June 3, 1933, discussed the issues facing Catholics in Spain and the required reaction of the global Catholic community.²¹ Encyclicals by Pius XI on Catholic persecution in Mexico and Russia would follow, in addition to an encyclical given on March 14, 1937, commenting on the state of the Catholic Church in Germany. While the Nazi concept of race is lightly criticized in the encyclical, the growing persecution of Jews is ignored and the work focuses primarily on where the Catholic Church fits in German society.²² To Bokenkotter, Pius XI clearly disagreed with Hitler and the Fascist movement, but he felt it was necessary to compromise with dictators in order to protect the Catholic Church in Europe.²³

While many historians have criticized and defended Pius XII for his role in defending Jews from persecution in Europe, his encyclicals - which were widely read and discussed in the United States Catholic community - did not discuss Jewish persecution on any level. Historians will continue to debate Pius XII's guilt, however his encyclicals clearly ignore the topic of Jewish persecution. To Bokenkotter, "there is no doubt that the Pope was fully informed about the extent and the nature of these crimes, and yet he kept silent, except for some vague and generalized references to Nazi crimes."²⁴

It is important to make the distinction of whether Catholics in the United States followed the example set by the Vatican - focusing on Catholic persecution while all but ignoring the persecution of Jews in Germany and surrounding Europe. Did Catholics living in the United States ignore Jewish persecution completely? Or did they compare it to Catholic suffering

²¹ Pius XI, "Dilectissima Nobis," *Vatican Website*, accessed July 9, 2012, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_03061933_dilectissima-nobis_en.html.

²² Pius XI, "Mit Brennender Sorge," *Vatican Website*, accessed July 9, 2012, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_14031937_mit-brennender-sorge_en.html.

²³ Bokenkotter, *A Concise History*, 387.

²⁴ Bokenkotter, *A Concise History*, 391.

elsewhere in the world, or actively petition against it? Before a truly successful analysis can begin, however, it is important to understand the background of Catholic persecution in Mexico, Spain, and Russia. American Catholics continuously lamented Catholic persecution in these areas while ignoring - or in some cases denying - Jewish persecution in Europe. What were these persecutions? How long did they last? The answers to these questions are necessary before moving forward with a truly in-depth analysis of the American Catholic reaction to the Holocaust.

The persecution of Catholics in Mexico was a direct consequence of the Cristero War, fought from 1926-1929. In short, religious rebel factions protested against the Mexican Constitution of 1917, which was signed by President Calles and contained a strong anti-religious sentiment. While diplomats from the United States eventually settled the crisis, anti-Catholic sentiment continued well into the 1930s. Pius XI's encyclicals on the topic prove that Mexican Catholics remained a concern to Catholics worldwide after the rebellion was silenced. In many instances American Catholics downplayed the severity of Jewish persecution and wondered why it received so much attention from the global press, while Catholic persecution in Mexico received less attention than it deserved.

The situation in Spain was even more bleak for Christians generally and Catholics specifically. Known as the Red Terror, radical leftists murdered tens of thousands of innocent Spanish citizens, including 6,832 members of the Catholic clergy.²⁵ The murders were a result of a failed revolution, and in the years that followed - primarily in 1937 - Catholic clergy members were castigated as revolutionaries. The anti-clerical sentiment lasted through the 1930s

²⁵ Julio De la Cueva, *Religious Persecution, Anticlerical Tradition and Revolution: On Atrocities against the Clergy during the Spanish Civil War*, (Journal of Contemporary History, Vol. XXXIII - 3, 1998), 355.

and into the 1940s, and remained a major concern for both the Vatican and for Catholics in the United States during this time.

The Soviet Union was perhaps the most fertile ground for anti-Christianity and anti-religious sentiment during the 1930s and 1940s, and American Catholics treated it as their main concern during those years. Under Stalin's rule, religious leaders were pariahs, and the government actively attempted to remove religious sentiments from Soviet culture. While the Russian Orthodox religion was perhaps the most persecuted in the 1930s and 1940s, both the Vatican and U.S. Catholics were vocal in their protests.²⁶ Both Pius XI and Pius XII spoke at length about the ills of Soviet policy towards religious, and American Catholics exhibited similar sentiments.

With a firm understanding of both the role of the Catholic Church in America as well as the currents of anti-Catholic sentiment in Mexico, Spain, and Russia, a true analysis of the reaction of American Catholics to the persecution of the Jews in Europe is possible. Catholics living in the United States habitually downplayed the persecution of Jews, and it was not until the 1940s that many Catholics were lamenting the treatment of their religious brothers. Many used the instances of anti-Catholicism in Mexico, Spain, and Russia to argue that Jewish persecution lacked any uniqueness.

²⁶ Bokenkotter, *A Concise History*, 377.

1933-1938: THE EARLY YEARS OF PERSECUTION

In January 1933, Adolf Hitler assumed the role of Chancellor of the German government, and the government sanctioned persecution of Jews began in earnest. While Hitler was very clear about his intentions, many American Catholics saw Hitler as a viable alternative to European Communism, and many seemed convinced that the anti-Jewish sentiment was merely a rhetorical tool. Additionally, many American Catholics questioned why Jewish persecution received attention from the press while Catholic persecution - in Germany and the rest of the world - went largely ignored. Little concern was shown for the increasingly hostile attitude towards Jews in Germany, and anti-Semitism - ranging from mild to quite severe - was commonplace amongst American Catholics.

The most important aspect of the American Catholic reaction to Hitler and the Nazi party from 1933-1938 was their opinions on the severity of anti-Jewish sentiment and action in Nazi Germany. Almost unanimously, American Catholics downplayed the severity of conditions for Jews and wrote off the impending genocidal campaign of Hitler and his Nazi party. An important theme, and one that occurs in a number of American Catholic publications, is that the reports of Jewish persecution were greatly exaggerated. In March 1933, *Tablet* editor Patrick Scanlan referred, in a somewhat agitated manner, to the “imagined horrors” of German Jews under Nazi control.²⁷ While the newspaper constantly questioned the reliability of reports from Germany,²⁸ Scanlan was quick to blame Jews for “exploiting up to the hilt”²⁹ the supposed persecution. When letters arrived in Scanlan’s mailbox criticizing the paper for not denouncing Hitler, the editor waxed shortly about the dangers of Nazism, but quickly followed up by

²⁷ *Tablet*, March 25, 1933.

²⁸ *Tablet*, August 5, 1933.

²⁹ *Tablet*, November 4, 1933.

insisting that the “rumors of persecution” were difficult to believe considering the unreliability of the surfacing reports.³⁰

Catholic writers in *America* agreed, questioning if the reports of Jewish persecution were true, or simply exaggerated folk tales. In 1933, an article argued that while reports of German anti-Semitism were surfacing, “the evidence would seem to point to frightful exaggerations, perhaps part of Communist propaganda which is known to wax fat on the miseries of others,” and the article later adds that “no future outbreaks need be feared” by the Jews.³¹ As late as 1935, the writers of *America* were lamenting the horror stories being published in secular newspapers, stories that were merely propaganda against a “great German people.”³² This sentiment is echoed by the newspaper’s readers, as can be seen in a letter to the editor published in 1934, which warned against “the wartime moronic type [of readers] who believed the propaganda atrocity stories” leaving Germany.³³

In addition to the idea that reports of Jewish persecution were greatly exaggerated, many American Catholics felt a sense of optimism that German fascism would pass without much incident, to either Jews or Catholics. The writers in *America* expressed optimism that Hitler and the Nazi party would burn out and fade away in a timely fashion, before too much damage could be done. In 1935, a full two years into Hitler’s reign, the writers of the Jesuit newspaper editorialized that no government that would tolerate attacks on its own people could possibly survive for an extended period of time. The situation in Germany may have been bad, but it certainly would not last much longer.³⁴

³⁰ *Tablet* January 6, 1934.

³¹ *America*, April 8, 1933.

³² *America*, February 9, 1935.

³³ *America*, August 4, 1934.

³⁴ *America*, May 18, 1935.

A sense of optimism also permeated the pages of the historically liberal *Commonweal*. In February 1933, immediately following Hitler's election as chancellor, *Commonweal*'s writers attempted to calm its readers, arguing that Germany was a great nation "having a magnificent past and the opportunity for an equally magnificent future."³⁵ Two months later, *Commonweal* questioned whether or not the worst was over in Germany. "Europe appears to be somewhat calmer. The Nazi government has apparently curtailed some of its barnstorming activities...we permit ourselves to hope that the worst of what was virtually a revolution is now over."³⁶ When Pope Pius XI signed the first concordat with Germany later in 1933, *Commonweal* took this as a sign that Catholics would be protected from persecution in Germany, noting that "the apparently well-grounded fear that Catholicism in its essential expression would be attacked by the Nazi regime was either unjustified, or has been averted." This optimism is taken even further when the writers argue that the concordat implies that most German Catholic Bishops support the Nazi government in Germany.³⁷

Commonweal's optimism is also evident through the magazine's constant insistence that the Nazi regime in Germany would be short-lived. To *Commonweal*'s editors, "there is every reason to believe that [Nazism] will ultimately turn into a set-back for German hopes and aspirations" because the aggressive program of Hitler is ultimately weak.³⁸ Moreover, once the nationalism inspired by Nazism has died down in Germany, the country will "once more be ready for constructive effort according to sound political and social tradition."³⁹ By January 1934, *Commonweal* had almost completely written off the threat of Nazism, declaring that in 1933 "Hitler came into power, dedicating Germany to a program which the rest of the world

³⁵ *Commonweal*, February 22, 1933, (453)

³⁶ *Commonweal*, April 26, 1933, (702)

³⁷ *Commonweal*, July 21, 1933, (295)

³⁸ *Commonweal*, June 30, 1933, (236)

³⁹ *Commonweal*, March 29, 1933, (594)

repudiated with so much energy that the revolutionary impetus of National Socialism was gradually slowed down until, by Christmas time, the tempo was relatively placid.”⁴⁰ Of course, Nazism had not died down, and the revolutionary impetus of the movement had only just begun.

Perhaps all that needs to be said regarding *Commonweal*'s underestimating of the Nazi regime can be seen in an article from May 4, 1934, where a column was dedicated to commenting on the fashion sense of Hitler's Brownshirts, the German militia made famous for their brutal violence and monochromatic uniform, and whether or not he stole the idea from Mussolini. This optimism on the part of *Commonweal*'s contributors is not without reason of course. It would seem that the writers were merely attempting to echo the attitudes of the Catholic hierarchy: “Obnoxious as [Nazism's] philosophy must still be to all thoughtful German Catholics, nevertheless the central authority of the Church consents to recognize it - because that government has consented to recognize the fundamental rights of the Catholic religion.”⁴¹

Not all American Catholics commiserated with the optimism of *Commonweal* and *America*, as is clear from a letter to the editors of *Commonweal* in 1933. In it, the reader commented that the Church should be doing more to fight against Fascism, asking “is there any explanation other than expediency for the Church leaders' reversal of their previous stance [against Nazism]? If so, I should be much interested to see it expounded in your columns.”⁴² In fact, after 1934 - more specifically the Night of the Long Knives, in which Hitler purged the Nazi party of all political threats - anti-Nazi sentiment *was* expounded in the columns of the newspaper, as more American Catholics noticed the sinister motives of Adolf Hitler. The writers seem genuinely shocked by the events of the Night of the Long Knives, when Hitler brutally murdered many Nazi leaders in a clear grab for power, declaring that even Shakespeare could not

⁴⁰ *Commonweal*, January 12, 1934, (282)

⁴¹ *Commonweal*, September 1, 1933, (419)

⁴² *Commonweal*, December 15, 1933, (188)

conjure the horrors seen. “The methods which flourished under Kings Richard and Macbeth were, however, almost child’s play compared with the edict of assassination carried out against dozens of those whose names have been on every German’s lips.”⁴³ The magazine even unintentionally foreshadows the events of the next ten years, calling the events of July 1934 a “holocaust.”⁴⁴ It became obvious that *Commonweal*’s optimism had ended when the writers declared that Germany had fallen under the “will of a despot.”⁴⁵ That same year, *Commonweal* declared that should Hitler remain in power, “Heaven alone knows what will happen then.”⁴⁶ It is interesting to note that after July 1934, all signs of optimism disappeared and talks of Hitler’s power waning were eliminated. Unfortunately, few other Catholics realized the true implications of a Hitler-run German government in the years leading up to November 1938.

On the whole, however, the simultaneous feelings of optimism for Germany and disbelief of the reports of Jewish persecution led American Catholics to largely ignore the warning signs of the genocide of the Jewish people. As a direct result, American Catholics also argued that Catholic persecution in Germany, in addition to Mexico, Russia, and Spain, matched and even overtook the anti-Semitism faced by Jews in Germany. This furthers the idea that American Catholics simply did not understand the extent of Hitler’s anti-Semitism and his commitment to destroying the Jewish people.

This is exactly the progression that can be seen in the pages of the *Tablet*. By 1934, the *Tablet* began employing a tactic of inserting Catholics into the narrative of Nazi persecution, which has been dubbed by Deborah Lipstadt as “universalizing the victim.”⁴⁷ After the Night of the Long Knives, an editorial appeared in the *Tablet* lamenting the death of a Catholic official,

⁴³ *Commonweal*, July 11, 1934, (277)

⁴⁴ *Commonweal*, July 20, 1934, (296)

⁴⁵ *Commonweal*, July 27, 1934, (316-7)

⁴⁶ *Commonweal*, August 17, 1934, (377)

⁴⁷ Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 250.

and arguing that Germany would soon “push home severe restrictive measures against Catholics.”⁴⁸ By 1935, Scanlan considered anti-Catholicism to be the primary social movement in Nazi Germany, overreaching even anti-Semitism.⁴⁹ As late as 1937, Scanlan’s paper was still arguing that anti-Catholicism had overtaken anti-Semitism in Germany, arguing that the Church was experiencing “unprecedented persecution.”⁵⁰

The editions of *Commonweal* published in the early 1930s also exhibited a desire to relate the severity of anti-Catholicism in Germany with the country’s obvious anti-Semitism, or “universalizing the victim,” as Scanlan did in the *Tablet*. As early as 1933, the editors of the magazine cautioned readers that while Jews were being persecuted in Germany, the experiences of Catholics were equally difficult.⁵¹ In October of 1934, writer and *Commonweal* contributor editorialized that it was highly probable that Christians in Germany “will have to go to prison and some will have to die at the hands of their executioner.”⁵² This insistence that Jews and Catholics were suffering equal harm in Germany even survived the Nuremberg Laws of 1935, which stripped all citizenship rights of German Jews. After explaining what the laws entailed, the writers warned of ensuing Catholic persecution. “Let us be under no illusions. Attacks quite as violent will be made upon Catholics.”⁵³

America followed suit, attempting to expose anti-Catholicism in Germany, while ignoring anti-Semitism in the same nation. In 1934, the editors of the magazine together called for support of Christian German refugees, and remained silent on Jews attempting to flee Nazi soil.⁵⁴ By 1935, readers of *America* were being told that “more than ever, the German Catholics need

⁴⁸ *Tablet*, July 7, 1934.

⁴⁹ *Tablet*, August 3, 1935.

⁵⁰ *Tablet*, July 26, 1937.

⁵¹ *Commonweal*, May 19, (69)

⁵² *Commonweal*, October 12, 1934, (550)

⁵³ *Commonweal*, September 27, 1935, (511-12)

⁵⁴ *America*, June 23, 1934.

the sympathies of the happier American Catholics...German Catholics, lost in their own country, look to the Catholics in foreign countries to stand with them for their religion.”⁵⁵ By August 1936, the editors had decided that anti-Catholicism in Germany was “no passing phase but a permanent policy,”⁵⁶ and warned that the “extinction” (a strangely foresighted word choice) of the Catholic Church was imminent. Things were constantly getting worse for Catholics, according to the newspaper, whose writers claimed in 1937 that “darker days are in store for the Catholics of Germany.”⁵⁷ By late October 1938, merely one week before the Nazis attacked Jewish owned shops and synagogues on *Kristallnacht*, the newspaper warned that the complete destruction of the Church in Germany was the primary aim of Nazis.⁵⁸ Strangely, Jews were not mentioned in any of these articles.

American Catholics not only compared anti-Semitism to anti-Catholicism in Germany, but they also argued that Catholic persecution in Mexico, Spain, and Russia was far worse than any persecution faced by Jews. Catholics writing in *America* lamented the treatment of Catholics in Mexico while simultaneously downplaying the severity of Hitler’s anti-Semitism. An article published in 1933, entitled “How About Mexico” asks exactly that:

“The stories of persecution of Jews coming out of Germany have stirred their coreligionists here to a pitch of fury and indignation...Jews of the country have asked their Christian fellow-citizens to join them in protest...Now here is a fair question. A persecution - of Catholics, of course - has been going on for some years in Mexico, and in savagery and concentrated hate it vastly exceeds anything that has been reported out of Germany...If Hitler and his followers really mean that they intend to stamp the Jewish religion out of Germany, then the same is true in a much greater degree of the Catholic religion in Mexico.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ *America*, May 25, 1935.

⁵⁶ *America*, August 1, 1936.

⁵⁷ *America*, April 3, 1937.

⁵⁸ *America*, October 29, 1938.

⁵⁹ *America*, April 1, 1933.

Commonweal's articles also compare the anti-Semitism in Germany with the anti-Catholic sentiment in Mexico. In one article criticizing *The American Hebrew*, a Jewish magazine, the author argues that “what unites the ruling power in Mexico with the most ominous development in Germany under Hitler is the effort being made in both countries to destroy the liberty of religion.”⁶⁰ Moreover, *Commonweal* argues that there is “a rather striking analogy between the Mexican situation and that of Nazi Germany...The spectacle of Jews in exile, banished to foreign lands, persecuted and browbeaten within the reich...is repeated in a slightly different way in Mexico.”⁶¹ A reader agreed, adding that while many have reached out to Jews in Germany to support them, those in Mexico need help too.⁶²

The American Catholics responsible for publishing *Tablet* also lamented anti-Catholic sentiment in Mexico. A front page editorial in March 1934 called even more attention to the worsening condition for Catholics as compared to Jews, asking “why is it such a terrible crime to arrest and place in a concentration several clergymen or Jews in Germany and apparently no offense to imprison hundreds in...Mexico?”⁶³ The refusal to believe reports of Jewish persecution quickly spiraled into a battle for the title of “most persecuted religion.”

In addition to Mexico, American Catholics argued that anti-Catholic sentiment was growing in Spain and Russia, under the respective communist governments. While the suffering of the Jews in Germany was certainly “lamentable,” the authors of *Commonweal* hoped that it will not overshadow the “dreadful plight of the [Catholic] Spanish people.”⁶⁴ Anti-Catholicism

⁶⁰ *Commonweal*, November 23, 1934, (104)

⁶¹ *Commonweal*, April 23, 1937, (711-2)

⁶² *Commonweal*, May 12, 1933 (49)

⁶³ *Tablet*, March 10, 1934.

⁶⁴ *Commonweal*, May 14, 1937, (59)

in Russia was also mentioned by many American Catholics in comparison to anti-Jewish sentiment.⁶⁵

The natural progression, then, was to question why, if anti-Catholicism was in fact worse than anti-Semitism in both Germany and the rest of the world, did Jews receive the majority of the press coverage? To Catholics, the mainstream press in America was overly focused on Jewish issues, and failed to adequately report on the suffering of Catholics across the globe. While it is certainly possible that the mainstream press in America failed to respond to Catholic sufferings adequately, the manner in which Catholics reacted to this perceived injustice is fascinating. Instead of actively petitioning against anti-Semitism in Germany along with various cases of anti-Catholicism, American Catholics chose to lament the amount of press coverage afforded each group, further minimizing the suffering of Jews in the process. This questioning varied in degrees, from merely questioning why Jews were receiving more attention to blaming Jews for controlling the media.

While *Commonweal* made every effort to expose the struggles of Catholics in Nazi Germany, the writers often lamented that too much attention was given to anti-Semitism. Essentially, while Jews received all of the press regarding racism in Germany, Catholics were “martyrs noiselessly.”⁶⁶ On more than one occasion, articles in *Commonweal* complained that Catholics did not receive the proper response from the American press even though they experienced “disabilities comparable with” that of the Jews.⁶⁷

Somehow, much of the blame is placed on the Jews for distorting the information that is released from Germany. According to one author, the issue is that “Jews know how to get

⁶⁵ *America*, October 21, 33.

⁶⁶ *Commonweal*, January 26, 1934, (343)

⁶⁷ *Commonweal*, June 29, 1934 (234) and February 15, 1935 (443)

publicity” and Catholics do not.⁶⁸ This inability results in little to no attention being paid to anti-Catholic events in Germany by the secular press, “whose spotlight has become almost exclusively concentrated upon the Jewish situation.”⁶⁹ This argument is taken one step further in 1935, when a *Commonweal* article came strangely close to blaming the Jews for their own situation in Germany: “the sole result of public Jewish agitation...has been both to harden the Nazis against Jews in Germany and to intensify their propaganda activities against the Jews in other countries.”⁷⁰ The double standard is obvious. Catholics should attempt to gain more publicity regarding their troubles in Germany, yet the ability of the Jews to do exactly that has lead to an increase in anti-Semitism. On one occasion in 1936, a reader agreed, commenting that anti-Catholicism in Germany has been largely ignored, and suggested that American priests include the topic in the homily during mass.⁷¹

In yet another example, the writers added that “the organization of a world-wide attack upon Hitler has been achieved largely under the leadership of Jews. Although Christian bodies have suffered disabilities comparable with theirs, Jewish agencies have always been aided by outspoken and gifted writers and publicists.”⁷² Again, *Commonweal*’s readers echoed the complaints of the magazine. In June of 1933, a reader commented that the publicity of the “so-called persecution of the Jews” is “in striking contrast to the appalling silence that has been observed during nearly twenty years of persecution in Mexico.”⁷³ In addition to failing to publish significantly on Catholic suffering in Mexico, writers lamented that while the situation in

⁶⁸ *Commonweal*, August 31, (418)

⁶⁹ *Commonweal*, November 1, 1935, (2)

⁷⁰ *Commonweal*, May 5, 1935, (18)

⁷¹ *Commonweal*, September 11, 1936, (468)

⁷² *Commonweal*, February 15, 1935, (443)

⁷³ *Commonweal*, June 2, 1933, (130)

Germany had received much attention thanks to Jewish publicity, “about Spain, Jews and Protestants care nothing - that is, they care nothing about Catholic Spain.”⁷⁴

America's writers also lamented consistently that Jews were getting a majority of the secular press' attention. Editor John Lafarge, writing in an April 1933 edition of the newspaper, questioned why Americans were only protesting Jewish persecutions. What about Catholic persecutions across the world, he asked? Where were the rallies to support Catholics in strife? What was it about Jews that enabled them to garner so much media attention?⁷⁵ The readers of *America* seem to agree, as a reader submitted letter in 1933 which read “I notice if someone says a word about a Jew in Poland they have parades from City College all over New York, and all the newspapers are full of the outrage. Protests are staged everywhere most vigorously.”⁷⁶

Social Justice, which began publication in 1936, often argued against the mainstream press and its coverage of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany. In an article discussing the Italian racial purity campaign of 1938, writer J.S. Barnes editorialized that the campaign addressed received unfair criticism as a result of the “undue influence of Jews on the American Press (largely through the power of withholding advertisements.)”⁷⁷ Patrick Scanlan, ever the supporter of Father Coughlin and *Social Justice*, similarly “exposed” the Jewish control of the secular media in the pages of the *Tablet*. As early as April 1933, Scanlan was reminding readers that Jews were not the only ones being persecuted (allegedly) in Germany. The solution, to Scanlan, was to organize a Catholic press similar to the Jewish press in America, which had succeeded in publicizing Jewish tragedy to an incredible extent.⁷⁸ Like Coughlin in *Social Justice*, Scanlan subtly yet consistently accused the American secular press of being infiltrated

⁷⁴ *Commonweal*, July 2, 1937, (258)

⁷⁵ *America*, April 8, 1933.

⁷⁶ *America*, January 7, 1933.

⁷⁷ *Social Justice*, September 26, 1938, (3).

⁷⁸ *Tablet*, April 1, 1933.

by Jews with an agenda to publicize and subsequently exploit Jewish persecution. On numerous occasions, then, Scanlan editorialized that Germany's anti-Jewish legislation only garnered media support because the victims were Jewish.⁷⁹

It becomes clear that American Catholics from 1933-1945 wholly underestimated the threat to Jews posed by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party. Reports of Jewish persecution were all but ignored, and Catholics lamented that Jews received the majority of the secular press' attention. As a result, then, it is interesting to analyze where American Catholics placed their allegiances in terms of European totalitarianism. Not surprisingly, the refusal to believe reports of Jewish persecution in Germany coupled with a constant focus on anti-Catholicism in Mexico, Spain, and Russia, all of which were controlled by Communist Governments, led some American Catholics to lean towards Fascism over Communism.

It is important to note first, however, that not *all* American Catholics chose Fascism blindly over Communism. The writers of *Commonweal* and *America*, most notably, insisted that Fascism was a negative force and both seem to reluctantly support Communism as the lesser of two evils. As early as 1934, the writers of *Commonweal* were condemning Nazism's ideals, arguing that "Hitlerism today is a menace to every country on its frontiers."⁸⁰ Additionally, there was a call for Catholics and Jews to work together against this societal evil. To *Commonweal*, both Christians and Jews were threatened by the rise of Hitler and the Nazi power, and so "the time has gone when anti-Semitism should be regarded as simply an affair for the Jews themselves."⁸¹ Moreover, by 1935 *Commonweal* was already discussing the many mutual interests of Catholics, Protestants, and Jews in fighting totalitarianism, specifically Nazism.⁸² By

⁷⁹ *Tablet*, August 12, 1933, June 9, 1934, May 22, 1937.

⁸⁰ *Commonweal*, March 16, 1934, (551)

⁸¹ *Commonweal*, December 28, 1934, (248)

⁸² *Commonweal*, March 15, 1935, (573)

1936, *Commonweal* lamented the failure of Jews, Catholics, and other Christian groups to work together, arguing that “if they had manifested one-tenth of the desire to respect and sustain one another which now animates them, the genius of Adolf Hitler would have expended itself on interior decorating.”⁸³ This insistence on denouncing Nazism was even echoed by the readers of *Commonweal* in the “Communications” (letters to the editor) section.⁸⁴ John Lefarge and the publishers of *America* joined in against Nazism, refusing to support Fascism over Communism, instead reluctantly choosing to support Communism.⁸⁵

Many American Catholics, unfortunately, were not as liberal-minded as the writers of *Commonweal* and *America*, and many sided with Fascism, which seemed to present better options for the Catholic faithful when compared to the more atheistic Communism. *Social Justice* was perhaps the leader of the pro-Fascist movement amongst American Catholics. To Coughlin and the other members of the editorial staff, Fascism was a viable alternative to Communism. In October 1938, in response to the Munich Agreement that effectively allowed Germany to annex Czechoslovakia, the newspaper labeled Czechoslovakia, a country with a largely Jewish population, a “mongrel state,” all while attempting to garner sympathy for Hitler and Nazi Germany. Soon after, the agreement was celebrated by *Social Justice*’s writers who explained that “the long persecuted Sudeten Germans” would finally be returned to the fatherland.”⁸⁶

Moreover, in Coughlin’s pre-*Kristallnacht* radio addresses, all of which were published in the pages of *Social Justice*, Coughlin repeatedly supported Fascism as a viable alternative to the Communism that was sweeping the nations of Eastern Europe. The support was subtle, but

⁸³ *Commonweal*, August 25, 1936, (431-2)

⁸⁴ *Commonweal*, July 2, 1937, (268)

⁸⁵ *America*, February 13, 1937, March 13, 1937.

⁸⁶ Warren, *Radio Priest*, 185 and *Social Justice*, October 3, 1938.

obvious. To Coughlin, Nazism was merely “Communism’s illegitimate child;” a child that posed a much less serious threat than its counterpart. While Coughlin presented the choice of Fascism over Communism as a necessary evil, he avoided a full condemnation of Naziism and Fascism while verbally obliterating all aspects of Communism.

Catholics in the *Tablet* reacted in kind. Immediately after Hitler’s ascension to the chancellorship in 1933, the *Tablet* attempted to convince its readers that Hitler’s policies could be compatible with the ideals of Roman Catholicism, both in America and Europe. In the same edition of the paper, however, an editorial written by Scanlan pleaded with President Roosevelt to not recognize nor associate with any Communist governments.⁸⁷ Two months later, Scanlan reminded leaders that Catholics still held strength in the German Reichstag, furthering the feeling of optimism amongst Catholics in Nazi Germany.⁸⁸ A year later, in 1934, the newspaper again attempted to allay the fears of Catholics regarding Hitler’s government by reporting that Hitler had conceded to the Roman Catholic Church on issues of sterilization and eugenics (a concession that failed to stand the test of time, of course).⁸⁹ Readers of the newspaper in the early years of Hitler’s reign were constantly presented with examples of Hitler bending to the whims of Catholic morality, and as a result, it is reasonable to conclude that many were unreasonably sympathetic towards Hitler and Nazi Germany.

The writers also jumped at any chance to compare Hitler to Stalin; Hitler was consistently presented as the more reasonable and less blood-thirsty of the two. In 1938, Scanlan argued that while both dictators “believe in government by murder...Hitler favors slower and fewer executions.”⁹⁰ This sentiment was echoed three months later, when Scanlan repeated that Hitler

⁸⁷ *Tablet*, February 25, 1933.

⁸⁸ *Tablet*, March 11, 1933.

⁸⁹ *Tablet*, January 6, 1934.

⁹⁰ *Tablet*, January 1, 1938.

was no match for Stalin's ruthlessness.⁹¹ Catholic readers of the *Tablet* were repeatedly told that the "rumors" of Jewish persecution in Germany were questionable at best, and were reminded at every opportunity that while Hitler was bad, Stalin was worse.

Finally, numerous times in the 1930s, Scanlan referred to anti-Fascist movements as clandestine Communists.⁹² To Scanlan, the only conceivable reason to protest vehemently against Fascism is to support Communism. However, in 1937, Scanlan took exception to an article in *The Nation* that argued that all anti-Communists were Fascists. Scanlan was apparently blind to the obvious hypocrisy.⁹³

The last question that needs to be addressed before moving to the next time period is that of blatant anti-Semitism. While it has been shown that American Catholics downplayed the significance of Jewish persecution, attempted to equate anti-Catholicism with anti-Semitism, lamented the lack of coverage in the secular press of Catholic persecution, and often openly supported Fascism, it has yet to be shown whether or not American Catholics exhibited overt signs of anti-Semitism.

Father Coughlin has often been considered the leader of the American Catholic anti-Semitism movement of the 1930s and 1940s, and the pages of *Social Justice* certainly live up to the reputation. In a September 1938 article entitled "Italy's Race Campaign," writer J.S. Barnes endorsed Mussolini's anti-Semitic racial policies, but insisted that the government had "no intention of intimidating anyone." The two page article is ultimately a response to an Italian manifesto that examined the differences among the races, differences *Social Justice* anointed as "strictly scientific." Moreover, in a tactic eerily similar to Hitler's branding of Jews as "others," Barnes argues that Jews in Italy had managed to maintain their racial purity, thus making them

⁹¹ *Tablet*, April 9, 1938.

⁹² *Tablet*, December 15, 1934, October 5, 1935.

⁹³ *Tablet*, January 2, 1937.

non-Italians. The article's anti-Semitism reaches a fever pitch when Barnes describes the qualities inherent in Jews:

“The Jew has a way of insinuating himself into key positions of influence and of taking advantage of the positions thus gained to exploit the Gentile and forward the policies favoring his own racial ambitions. He is extremely adaptable and a master of the art of camouflage. His sensitiveness to the way the wind is about to blow is a racial talent which he knows well how to turn to his profit, whether it be in finance or in exploiting a fashion...This has earned him, not altogether unjustly, the opprobrious epithet of parasite...In other words, his interest lies in exploiting the unorganized and in profiting off every manner of usury.”⁹⁴

While the article makes every attempt to qualify its anti-Semitic speech, the resounding attitude is greatly supportive of Italy's campaign for Gentile racial purity.

It was not only Coughlin, however, that exhibited extreme anti-Semitism in the years leading up to *Kristallnacht* in November 1938. In 1934, Scanlan echoed a common Coughlin refrain when he editorialized that there were “good Jews” and “bad Jews,” and warned Catholics not to confuse the two.⁹⁵ This idea was taken a step further when Scanlan implied, rather unsubtly, that the “bad Jews” were “spoiling the race.”⁹⁶

Scanlan vehemently supported Father Coughlin, even after his all too common racist tirades. In 1937, when anti-Coughlin sentiments were beginning to surface in both the Catholic and secular press, Scanlan published an editorial that argued that the embattled radio priest would “always remain as the friend and spokesman of the man on the street, of the oppressed and exploited.” Moreover, Scanlan called for public support of Coughlin's radio program, and expressed certainty that Coughlin was a “loyal priest” who deserved to continue broadcasting his sermons and publishing his newspaper.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ *Social Justice*, September 26, 1938, (3).

⁹⁵ *Tablet*, March 3, 1934.

⁹⁶ *Tablet*, March 10, 1934.

⁹⁷ *Tablet*, November 13, 1937.

Finally, the historically liberal Catholics in *America* added to the anti-Semitic rhetoric. In April 1933, an article lashed out against Jews for persecuting Catholics in Spain,⁹⁸ and in October of the same year, an article discussing the emigration of Jews out of Germany argued that “a transfer of residence is often merely a transfer of problem...the Jew does not mix evenly with the surrounding population. That is to say, he crowds into the professions, the temples of trade and banking. A negligible number try to strike roots in the soil, the true source of strength for any group.”⁹⁹ Not only is this anti-Semitic, but it also blames Jews for their persecutions, a tactic used liberally by both Coughlin and Scanlan throughout Hitler’s reign.

The publishers of *America* were supportive of Coughlin, even after his racist radio addresses that found him in trouble with the secular media. While *America* was much more reluctant in its support than Scanlan and the *Tablet*, it is clear that in the years before *Kristallnacht*, the Jesuit publication supported both Coughlin and his right to publish his often controversial views, arguing that while he often made mistakes, he was a good priest who had positive intentions.¹⁰⁰

It is clear that from 1933-1945 American Catholics failed to understand the threat posed by Hitler on a number of levels. To place this grave misunderstanding in perspective, from 1933-1938, in the four newspapers analyzed in this study, only *one* example of an overt call to help the Jews can be found. In July 1933, six months after Hitler was elected to the position of Chancellor, an editorial in the pages of *America* argued that Catholics should help Jews in Germany.¹⁰¹ That is the only case of an American Catholic movement to help Jews. During this time, Hitler was setting the wheels of genocide in motion, and American Catholics utterly failed

⁹⁸ *America*, April 18, 1933.

⁹⁹ *America*, October 21, 1933.

¹⁰⁰ *America*, May 19, 1934, November 21, 1936, November 20, 1938.

¹⁰¹ *America*, July 7, 1933.

to come to the aid of the Jewish people. Jewish persecution was downplayed, and suffering was all but ignored. By November 9, 1938, the horrible events of *Kristallnacht* should have forced American Catholics to realize that they had underestimated the threat of Hitler and his Nazi party. Unfortunately, this was not the case.

NOVEMBER 1938: REACTIONS TO *KRISTALLNACHT*

“When, on the night of November 8, 1938, the glass was shattered in Jewish homes and stores throughout the Reich, also shattered were most vestiges of American doubts about the degree to which violence was fundamental to Nazi ideology. American public opinion, as reflected in both the press and public-opinion polls, was universal in its condemnation. Despite the intense criticism, many Americans - among them government officials and the press - still seemed to fail to recognize that the Nazis could not be reasoned out of this seemingly facile policy of anti-Semitism.”

-Deborah Lipstadt, “The American News Media and the Holocaust”

In terms of public perception, November 9, 1938 was a game changer. No longer could public officials, media, or members of society deny Hitler’s genocidal aims towards the Jewish people. 30,000 Jewish men were arrested and 91 Jews murdered by members of the Nazi party in the largest and first act of violence against the Jewish people that was overtly sanctioned by the government. Unfortunately, while some American Catholics realized the threat and began petitioning on behalf of the suffering German Jews, many continued to downplay the significance of Nazi anti-Semitism and violence even after receiving concrete evidence proving the contrary.

Father Coughlin’s response, both in the pages of *Social Justice* and on his weekly radio program, exhibits perfectly the backwards logic and dangerous rhetoric of many American Catholics immediately following the events of *Kristallnacht*. On November 20, 1938, Coughlin addressed his radio listeners for the first time since news of the events of *Kristallnacht* had reached the United States. In his address, Coughlin again compared “good Jews” and “bad Jews,” denounced the significance of *Kristallnacht*, and argued that anti-Catholicism was still the major form of persecution in both the United States and the rest of the world.

Coughlin hoped to address a simple question in his address: “Why is there persecution in Germany today? How can we destroy it?” The speech starts out in a very non-Coughlin tone, with the radio priest lamenting that “although cruel persecution to German-born Jews has been notorious since 1933 - particularly since the loss of their citizenship - nevertheless, until last week the Nazi purge was concerned, chiefly, with foreign born Jews.” However, the thesis of the speech quickly became hostile towards the Jews who had suffered.

Immediately, Coughlin begged his readers to understand the difference between good Jews and bad Jews: “I do ask, however, an insane world to distinguish between the innocent Jew and the guilty Jew.” These bad Jews, Coughlin argued, were responsible for the attacks on all German Jews by Nazi party officials. Moreover, Coughlin questioned how serious the events of November 9 were. Listeners and readers were invited to take solace in the fact that Germany had not yet “resorted to the guillotine, to the machine gun, to the kerosene-drenched pit as instruments of reprisal against Jew or gentile.” Indeed, Coughlin soon arrived at his true argument: that while the events of *Kristallnacht* were indeed unfortunate, Catholics still suffered worse persecutions and were still unable to receive the media attention afforded to Jews.

First, Coughlin repeatedly reminded his listeners and readers of the misfortunes faced by Christians and Catholics not only in Germany, but also in Mexico, Spain, and Russia. The simplest method of inserting Catholicism into the discourse of persecution was to remind readers that Communism was still the largest evil in totalitarianism. Fascism is consistently referred to merely as a defense mechanism against Communism. Further, Coughlin begged both Catholics and Jews to fight Communism, not Fascism. The implication is clear: despite the events of *Kristallnacht*, the Communism of Mexico and Russia, which targeted Catholics, was worse than the Nazism of Germany, which targeted Jews.

As a result, Coughlin attacked Jews and their ability to garner media support, albeit in a backhanded manner. Jews were called “a powerful minority in their influence; a minority endowed with aggressiveness; an initiative which, despite all obstacles, has carried their sons to the pinnacle of success in journalism, in radio, in finance and in the sciences and arts.” As a result, Coughlin argued, “no story of persecution was ever told one-half so well” as the story of Jewish persecution in Germany. The Jews, who control the press and the media, succeeded in garnering public support for \$400 million reprisal (Coughlin’s description of *Kristallnacht*), while between 1917 and 1938 “more than 20 million Christians were murdered by the Communistic government in Russia” and “not \$400-million but \$40-billion - at a conservative estimate - of Christian property was appropriated” by Communists. These injustices, which are presented in a manner that elevates them above those faced by Jews, have been ignored by the Jewish controlled media, according to Coughlin.¹⁰²

In the following weeks, many major media outlets criticized Coughlin’s attitude towards Jewish persecution, and he was almost universally criticized for his words. Coughlin insisted that he never meant to lessen the suffering of Jews, however for nearly a month after his speech he continued to relate the suffering of Jews with the sufferings of Christians, which he maintained were more severe. Readers and listeners were reminded that Communism remained enemy number one, and that Fascism was merely an unintended consequence of Communism, one that would eventually sort itself out.

Patrick Scanlan and the other editors of the *Tablet*, however, were not a part of the backlash towards Coughlin. While Coughlin’s response to *Kristallnacht* has certainly been more publicized by historians, Scanlan and the rest of the editorial staff at the *Tablet* insisted, like Coughlin, that Catholic persecution was still more egregious than anti-Semitism in Germany.

¹⁰² *Social Justice*, November 20, 1938.

Moreover, Scanlan vehemently supported Coughlin, and in the weeks after the radio priest was criticized for his words following *Kristallnacht*, the *Tablet* published front page editorials supporting Coughlin for seven straight weeks.

Immediately following the tragic events of November 9, 1938, Scanlan reminded his readers - in a front page editorial - that Catholics were still the most persecuted religious or racial minority in Germany.

“WE REPEAT, WE DENOUNCE ALL PERSECUTIONS, WHETHER NAZI OR COMMUNIST, AND UPHOLD THE VICTIMS...THE SAD NOTE IS HERE; WHILE THE PRESS AND PUBLIC OFFICIALS BITTERLY DENOUNCE THE ATTACK ON TEN SYNAGOGUES IN GERMANY, THE BREAKING OF JEWISH SHOP WINDOWS AND THE BRUTAL DISPERSAL OF JEWS, UNFORTUNATELY THE PROTEST HAS NOT BEEN WIDENED TO INCLUDE THE FAR WORSE CRIMES COMMITTED AGAINST THE CATHOLICS OF SPAIN.”¹⁰³

Again, the message is clear: Jewish persecutions are bad, but Catholics are suffering more and deserve the media attention being afforded to Jews. Like Coughlin, Scanlan reminded his readers that the Jews themselves were responsible for the disparity in media coverage. “One thing we give our Jewish friends credit for is the united, public, and self-centered way in which they marshal all their forces in defense of their people.”¹⁰⁴ Moreover, the writers of the *Tablet* added that while anti-Catholicism was certainly worse in Germany, it was “obviously” worse in America.¹⁰⁵ While there was certainly some of this attitude before *Kristallnacht*, the defensive tone of Coughlin and Scanlan were magnified in its immediate aftermath.

While *Social Justice* and the *Tablet* responded in the most hostile way towards *Kristallnacht*, the writers of the more historically liberal *America* were certainly lacking enough compassion or anger at the growing anti-Semitism in Europe. The newspaper condemned the Nazi pogrom, but continued to question whether Catholics were being treated fairly in both

¹⁰³ *Tablet*, November 19, 1938.

¹⁰⁴ *Tablet*, November 19, 1938.

¹⁰⁵ *Tablet*, December 3, 1938.

Germany and America. Even after *Kristallnacht*, *America* was still “universalizing the victim” and questioning why Catholics did not receive the same media coverage as Jews. Immediately after the events of November 9, 1938, the editors of *America* published a lengthy article rejecting Hitler’s treatment of Jews in Germany, seemingly separating themselves from the reactions of more vocal and conservative American Catholics.

“This teaching [of racial hatred] has been used by Hitler chiefly against the Jews, on the plea that German blood must be kept in its original racial purity...It can be accepted by no government which realizes its duties to every class under its rule, and it must be emphatically rejected by everyone who believes that we are all children of God before whom there is no distinction of Jew and Gentile.”¹⁰⁶

However, by December 1938, *America* joined *Social Justice* and the *Tablet* in their complaints that Jews were receiving more attention than Catholics. As usual, however, *America* presented its views in a far less volatile tone. The message, however, was the same.

“Some of them have noted the silence of the radio and the blankness of the press when these atrocities were committed. Their points were well made. But they are made, it would seem, to our Catholic shame, and to the shame of the American people as a whole. Catholics, unlike the Jews, did not seek to arouse any public indignation that would lead to action; or if they did make the attempt, they failed, either because of the ineptness and their disunity or because they could not succeed in enlisting the support and cooperation of the Protestant and the Jew.”¹⁰⁷

In addition to its complaints about the press, the contributors to *America* began wondering why the United States government considered going to war with Germany, while the government never considered waging a war with Spain or Mexico, where Catholics were being persecuted.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, the newspaper questioned why Americans were so concerned with assisting Jewish refugees and not Catholic refugees from Spain “whose sufferings have been much greater.”¹⁰⁹ Finally, the writers of *America* editorialized in strong defense of Coughlin’s

¹⁰⁶ *America*, November 12, 1938.

¹⁰⁷ *America*, November 3, 1938.

¹⁰⁸ *America*, November 3, 1938.

¹⁰⁹ *America*, January 14, 1939.

radio program staying on the air. To the writers, thousands of Catholics wanted to hear Coughlin and they deserved the right to do so.¹¹⁰

The Catholic Americans responsible for producing the content of *Commonweal* exhibited without a doubt the most commendable response to the growing persecution against German Jews. After the horrible events of *Kristallnacht*, *Commonweal's* tone shifted immensely, and the writers of *Commonweal* condemned the *Tablet*, when it compared the anti-Catholic sentiment of the Witnesses of Jehovah with anti-Semitism in Germany. According to *Commonweal*, which only a few weeks earlier had compared Nazi anti-Semitism with anti-Catholicism in other countries, the attacks of the Witnesses of Jehovah on Catholics “seems to us a trivial thing when compared” with the anti-Semitism of Germany. Even the letters to the editor experienced a shift in tone regarding the comparison of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism. One letter, published in 1940, argued that these type of comparisons are “deplorable” due to the fact that “the Jews in Germany have been driven from their homes, robbed of their property, separated from their families, herded into cattle cars, sent to freeze and to do forced labor and placed beyond the pale of any protective laws.”¹¹¹

In another dramatic shift, the articles in *Commonweal* began discussing the conditions of Jews in Germany in specific and graphic terms. Exactly one month after *Kristallnacht*, on December 9, 1938, an article mentioned a “deliberate wholesale extermination” for the first time. Moreover, the author asked whether or not Jews “can escape this presaged extermination.”¹¹² This is quite a shift from earlier articles which complained that Jews received undue attention.

The dramatic shift in *Commonweal's* tone after the events of *Kristallnacht* in Germany is evident. Before *Kristallnacht*, the Catholic magazine habitually compared the anti-Semitism in

¹¹⁰ *America*, December 10, 1938.

¹¹¹ *Commonweal*, January 26, 1940, (306)

¹¹² *Commonweal*, December 9, 1938, (177)

Germany to anti-Catholicism both in Germany and also in Mexico and Spain. After November 1938, however, *Commonweal* condemned such comparisons. Moreover, the authors of the magazine began detailing the specifics of anti-Semitic actions taking place in Nazi Germany. The events of *Kristallnacht* forced *Commonweal*'s writers to realize that the anti-Semitism of Hitler and the Nazis far outweighed anti-Catholic sentiment in Germany.

In addition to this tremendous shift regarding the severity of the Jewish problem in Germany, the writers of *Commonweal* also changed their perspective regarding the responsibility of American Catholics during Hitler's reign. Before *Kristallnacht*, *Commonweal* articles rarely criticized the American Catholic press or American Catholics regarding their response to Nazism in Germany. After *Kristallnacht*, however, *Commonweal* was full of attacks on the conservative press, including *Social Justice* and Coughlin, and American Catholics who supported the Nazi regime. Interestingly, however, little to nothing was written regarding the responsibility of the Vatican to help Jews. Largely, the debate between *Commonweal* and other Catholic Press organizations regarded the progressive refusal of *Commonweal* to side with Fascism due to the rampant anti-Catholicism of the alternative, Communism. Unlike *Commonweal*, the Catholic Press as a whole in addition to many Catholic Americans supported Nazism as a result of both a fear of Communism and a wealth of anti-Semitism.

Before *Kristallnacht*, *Commonweal* rarely criticized Coughlin or any other members of the Catholic Press on their response to Nazism in Germany. In 1935, *Commonweal* published one of its only pre-*Kristallnacht* attacks on Coughlin, calling his influence as a Priest on the teachings of Catholicism "extremely dubious."¹¹³ In response to this sparse criticism, a reader of *Commonweal* commented that "for a long time it has been evident that the editors of

¹¹³ *Commonweal*, May 31, 1935, (113-4)

Commonweal are prejudiced against Father Coughlin.”¹¹⁴ This negative response from readers hints at the progressiveness of *Commonweal*'s occasional criticisms of Coughlin and the mainstream Catholic Press in America.

In the months and years that followed November 1938, *Commonweal*'s articles became much more hostile towards Coughlin and the conservatism of the Catholic press. Immediately after *Kristallnacht*, on December 9, 1938, *Commonweal* opened its magazine with a blistering critique of Coughlin's radio program and *Social Justice* periodical. According to the article, Coughlin's anti-Semitism has made him a favorite of the German Nazi press. Moreover, the article criticized Coughlin's "cavalier disregard for pertinent historical testimony, his insensitiveness to the consequences of his acts on German and Jews, [and] his all too pious acceptance of propaganda from a party whose Fuehrer proudly boasts his machine is based on huge lies." This same article includes a criticism of the *Tablet*, another favorite target of *Commonweal* in the post-*Kristallnacht* years, declaring that what drives Coughlin, the Brooklyn *Tablet*, and other Catholic publications is blatant anti-Semitism.¹¹⁵

In a direct response to Coughlin's radio address of November 20, 1938, *Commonweal* published a lengthy article discussing Coughlin's role in promoting American anti-Semitism. "His explanation [of why *Kristallnacht* took place] was stated in such terms as to suggest that the Jews in Germany deserved, to a considerable extent, the cruel injuries which they have suffered at the hands of the Nazis. The majority of his hearers undoubtedly concluded that 'the Jews had it coming.'"¹¹⁶ These criticisms of Coughlin were numerous, and ranged from attacking his

¹¹⁴ *Commonweal*, November 6, 1936, (45)

¹¹⁵ *Commonweal*, December 9, 1938, (169)

¹¹⁶ *Commonweal*, December 30, 1938, (260)

radio program's appropriateness on public radio to calling his *Social Justice* magazine "deplorable."¹¹⁷

In addition to causing a great change in tone regarding the severity of anti-Semitism in Germany and the responsibilities of American Catholics, the events of *Kristallnacht* caused a minor yet critically important shift in *Commonweal's* rhetoric regarding the Jewish refugee problem. Before *Kristallnacht*, the editors and writers of *Commonweal* called for Western nations to help Jews, but the demand was reserved. After November 9, 1938, however, *Commonweal* called for a complete opening of the United States and a complete suspension of the quota system limiting the number of European Jews eligible to enter the United States currently in place.

In January 1937, *Commonweal* pushed for donations to help "non-Aryan" Christians defect out of Nazi occupied Germany. The article calls for help but stops short of outlining a specific plan of action.¹¹⁸ Over a year later, in April 1938, *Commonweal* petitioned that "if all the nations in this hemisphere make their contribution, a solution will be achieved that, while not causing injury or injustice to the nationals of the respective countries, will provide a place of refuge for those who find life intolerable in totalitarian countries."¹¹⁹ These pleas for help, while impassioned, present a plan far less urgent than the one proposed after November 1938. This new plan, first detailed on November 25, 1938, was impressively progressive.

Commonweal specifically calls for an immediate modification of the American immigration laws. First of all quota allotments should, at least for the time being, be suspended in favor of refugees; secondly it should be made possible for refugees to enter this country without the present requirement of liquid financial resources or else sponsorship by an American citizen. Finally the official red tape which now entangles

¹¹⁷ *Commonweal*, November 24, 1939 (114), & April 10, 1942, (605)

¹¹⁸ *Commonweal*, January 1, 1937, (274)

¹¹⁹ *Commonweal*, April 8, 1938, (647)

anyone trying to get a “quota” visa should be cut...The final, compelling demands of charity are too obvious to need specifying.¹²⁰

Moreover, *Commonweal* condemned America’s lack of effort on the part of refugees, lamenting that “the Jew is left to grope out of his spiritual tangle and confusion alone.”¹²¹ *Kristallnacht* forced the writers and editors of *Commonweal* to realize that the persecutions faced by Jews in Germany was unparalleled and required special attention. Unfortunately, this reaction was less than typical amongst American Catholics, specifically those responsible for publishing Catholic newspapers.

¹²⁰ *Commonweal*, November 25, 1938, (113)

¹²¹ *Commonweal*, December 9, 1938, (177)

1939-1945: THE FINAL SOLUTION

By 1939, Hitler's murderous goals should have been clear to American Catholics. As Deborah Lipstadt excellently argued in *Beyond Belief*, major secular news outlets were providing Americans with many details of Jewish persecution by 1939.¹²² Any refusal to believe the horror stories results, then, from a lack of understanding rather than a lack of information. Of course, a more cynical explanation seems at least plausible.

As of 1939, many American Catholics still compared the suffering of Jews in Germany to that of Catholics in Germany. According to *America*, Nazis were working "in a systematic way to eradicate Catholics."¹²³ Further, in February 1940, an editorial claimed that the Catholic Church was the "main target" in Poland.¹²⁴ Somehow, the magazine completely ignored the suffering of Jews in Poland, the home of all six death camps as well as a number of killing fields.

The writers of *America* also focused on anti-Catholicism in Germany, further universalizing the victim of Nazi persecution. An editorial in 1939 lamented that "scarcely a morning newspaper passes without the recording of another incident of the persecution grinding down the Churches of Germany and Austria...soon the teaching of religion will cease."¹²⁵ Roughly a year and a half later, the newspaper continued, claiming that "the task before the National Socialist educator is, therefore, to remove all traces of Christianity so that the German spirit may develop unimpeded."¹²⁶ Neither of these articles mentions the suffering of Jews in Germany, as at this time *America* was still primarily focused on anti-Catholicism in Europe, while rarely discussing anti-Semitism and Jewish persecution with as much passion and frequency. In one of many *Tablet* editorials that condemned anti-Catholicism in Soviet-

¹²² Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 23.

¹²³ *America*, May 18, 1940.

¹²⁴ *America*, February 10, 1940.

¹²⁵ *America*, July 15, 1939.

¹²⁶ *America*, November 30, 1940.

occupied Poland but made no mention of anti-Semitism in either Soviet or German-occupied Poland, Scanlan complained that crucifixes were being removed from classes and replaced with a portrait of Stalin.¹²⁷ If someone were to read only the issues of *America*, the *Tablet*, and *Social Justice* from 1939-1941, without any previous knowledge of Hitler or the Holocaust, he or she would develop a deep misunderstanding of the severity of anti-Semitism in Europe and the goals of the Nazi administration.

As they did from 1933-1938, complaints of press attention to anti-Semitism over anti-Catholicism arose in a number of American Catholic societies. On May 6, 1939, while Jews worldwide were still recovering from the shocking events of *Kristallnacht*, Scanlan published a scathing editorial in the *Tablet* which attacked anyone who complained about anti-Semitism. To Scanlan, “those who so frequently lecture on racism” tend to “stamp Christians and Christianity as inferior.” Moreover, those who demand equality essentially suffer from a “superiority complex.” Clearly, Scanlan’s views about Jews and Judaism were unaffected by *Kristallnacht*, and these views were reflected in the pages of his newspaper.¹²⁸ In April 1934, the editors of the Jesuit *America* complained that Jews were attempting to rouse too much support in the wake of Nazi persecutions. “Every avenue of information and propaganda is being utilized to arouse Americans to give support, protection, and, ultimately, hospitality to Jewish exiles.”¹²⁹ These complaints beg the question of whether many American Catholics simply misunderstood the severity of Jewish persecution, or were actively attempting to downplay it.

In addition to the call for Catholic support, many American Catholics continued to condemn Communism while ignoring the ills of Fascism in general and Nazism specifically. In particular, the writers of *Social Justice* and the *Tablet* continued to lambast the various

¹²⁷ *Tablet*, May 11, 1940.

¹²⁸ *Tablet*, May 6, 1939.

¹²⁹ *America*, 4/1/1939.

Communist governments in the world, while Father Coughlin joined in on his radio programs. Some Catholics in America did criticize this choice of Communism over Fascism, most notably those responsible for *Commonweal*. When Coughlin began associating with a well known American Nazi movement that rose in the late 1930s and early 1940s, *Commonweal* immediately exposed the radio priest. In its coverage of the Christian Mobilizers, the American Nazi group, *Commonweal* made sure to mention one of the Christian Mobilizer's biggest influences, and note that in a speech made by the director of the Mobilizers, Coughlin was hailed as "the truest carrier of the cross since Jesus Christ," thanks to his support of Nazism over Communism. To the writers of *Commonweal*, this choice was an unacceptable violation of core Catholic beliefs, and one that needed to be reported to the rest of the American Catholic community.¹³⁰

Many American Catholics continued to exhibit blatant anti-Semitism well into the 1940s, seemingly unaware of the consequences of such behavior being played out before their eyes across the Atlantic. Catholics lamented anti-Catholicism and ignored anti-Semitism, complained about Jewish media dominance, and continued to argue that Fascism was a preferable alternative to Communism. Perhaps the single event that characterized this type of attitude can be found in the pages of *Social Justice*, which examined the "Brooklyn Boys" trial of 1940.

The case revolved around the arrest of 17 Brooklyn men, who were arrested while plotting to overthrow the government. According to Donald Warren, "a cache of arms was seized, including homemade bombs, several rifles, thousands of rounds of ammunition" and the plot "would destroy Jewish-owned newspapers and stores and blow up bridges, utilities, docks, and railroad stations in the New York City Area."¹³¹ The controversy arose when information was released that suggested the arrested men were devoted followers of Coughlin's radio

¹³⁰ *Commonweal*, March 22, 1940, (472)

¹³¹ Warren, *Radio Priest*, 192.

program and *Social Justice*. In response, Coughlin spoke at length both on the radio and in his newspaper about the arrested men. Essentially, to Coughlin, the Christian Fronters (organization that the men belonged to) were noble members in the fight for Christianity and Americanism and calls them “pro-American, pro-Christian, anti-Communist, and anti-Nazi group.”¹³² Moreover, Coughlin argued that the arrests were merely a plot by the Attorney General to spread lies about an anti-Communist organization. No mention was made, by Coughlin, about the groups plans to attack Jews and overthrow Jewish newspapers.

The editors of the *Tablet* were also unwavering in their support of Father Coughlin, both in regards to his radio show and his stance on the “Brooklyn Boys” trial. When rumblings regarding Coughlin’s radio show and its possible censorship became louder in the national news media, the *Tablet* ran a front page reprint of the priest’s radio address as well as an editorial demanding free speech.¹³³ Further, when *Commonweal* attacked Coughlin for his stance on the “Brooklyn Boys” trial, Scanlan rushed to the priest’s defense, calling *Commonweal’s* article a “savage” and “vindictive” attack on “men still guiltless of any crime,” while reminding readers that Father Coughlin was not on trial, and therefore not responsible for the crimes of the Brooklyn men.¹³⁴ Roughly a month later, Scanlan defended Coughlin once again. “Most of these organizations and their propaganda area assailing Father Coughlin with acid epithets...Certainly he has not attacked Jews with one hundredth the fury with which he has been attacked.”¹³⁵ When the calls for Coughlin’s radio program to be removed from the air reached their peak, Scanlan presented one last effort to rouse support for the embattled priest.

Father Coughlin cannot return to the air this year. It is not the Church...or any regulations which prevent the priest’s return. It is not due to his lack of audience...It is not the

¹³² Warren, *Radio Priest*, 193.

¹³³ *Tablet*, August 5, 1939.

¹³⁴ *Tablet*, January 27, 1940.

¹³⁵ *Tablet*, February 24, 1940.

question of finances...And we daresay it is not the contents of the speeches that are objectionable...Tolerance, free speech, [and] fair play are thrown out the window.”¹³⁶ Finally, in addition to mocking those who fight anti-Semitism and blindly supporting

Many public figures as well as competing newspapers began criticizing Scanlan and the *Tablet*, calling the editor a Fascist and pro-Nazi. In his response, Scanlan waxed poetic about responsible journalism and ethical reporting, but failed to provide any specific defenses of his paper. To Scanlan, repeatedly claiming that he opposed anti-Semitism was enough to prove it, regardless of the irresponsibility of his reporting regarding Jews.¹³⁷ By 1942, when the *Tablet* was being universally condemned for its pro-Hitler stance, Scanlan replied by declaring that his magazine was the first to take an anti-Hitler stance.¹³⁸ These words, of course, are hollow after a deeper analysis of the paper’s reporting from 1933-1945, which exhibited a profound misunderstanding of European events, and a malicious and permeating sense of anti-Semitism.

While Scanlan and the writers of the *Tablet* were criticized in the secular press, Coughlin was condemned heavily by members of the American Catholic hierarchy for his stance on the “Brooklyn Boys” trial, perhaps signaling a turning point in the American Catholic response to the persecution of German Jews. As early as 1940, archbishop Edward Mooney began pushing for censorship of Coughlin’s role in *Social Justice*. The policy of censorship was enforced so swiftly that by the middle of 1940 Mooney declared, somewhat prematurely, that Coughlin had “no ownership or responsibility for [*Social Justice*] and neither contributes articles to it nor publicly promotes its circulation.”¹³⁹ Of course, Coughlin still contributed frequently to the magazine’s output, but this was the beginning of the end for Coughlin and his publications.

¹³⁶ *Tablet*, September 28, 1940.

¹³⁷ *Tablet*, November 25, 1939.

¹³⁸ *Tablet*, February 14, 1942.

¹³⁹ Warren, *Radio Priest*, 224.

Regardless of whether Mooney's censorship of Coughlin was effective, the newspaper was shut down in 1942.

Members of the American Catholic laity also responded with harsh words for Scanlan and Coughlin, which is documented heavily in the pages of *Commonweal*. In January 1940, when the "Brooklyn Boys" were arrested, *Commonweal* pointed the finger of blame at Coughlin and the *Tablet*. "Father Coughlin, the *Tablet*, *Social Justice* and their many abettors and sympathizers must bear the direct responsibility for the plight of these seventeen young men."¹⁴⁰ The severe criticism of Communism found in the pages of the *Tablet* and *Social Justice*, according to writers of *Commonweal*, drove these men towards Nazism and extreme anti-Semitism.

While Coughlin received the brunt of *Commonweal*'s attacks, the writers of the *Tablet* were also heavily criticized. When the *Tablet* implied that there were certain types of anti-Semitism approved by the Pope, *Commonweal* took great offense and lashed out at the conservative weekly paper. In the same article, when the *Tablet*'s writers referred to the "so-called" Committee of Catholics to Fight Anti-Semitism, *Commonweal* responded humorously by asking "why 'so-called,' *Tablet*? What would you call it?"¹⁴¹ The *Tablet* was often mentioned by writers of *Commonweal* as responsible for growing anti-Semitism in America, and it was referred to as a "horrible tabloid" made up of "wretched columns."¹⁴²

The writers of *Commonweal* often complained that Coughlin and papers like the *Tablet* were not criticized enough by either the secular or Catholic press, calling this reaction "surprisingly subdued and infrequent."¹⁴³ The point is well taken, especially when considering

¹⁴⁰ *Commonweal*, January 26, 1940, (293)

¹⁴¹ *Commonweal*, July 21, 1939, (305-6)

¹⁴² *Commonweal*, January 17, 1941, (326)

¹⁴³ *Commonweal*, December 16, 1938, (213)

the response *Commonweal* received for criticizing Coughlin and other conservative members of the Catholic Press. The incredibly diverse nature of this response can be seen by examining an exchange that occurred between two readers in May 1939. On May 5, a reader lashed out at a writer of *Commonweal* who had criticized Coughlin by asking whether the writer was merely a Jewish propaganda tool. “Is he now a paid propagandist of the American Jewish Congress, or in the employ of the association to create a better feeling between Jews and Christians?” The main contention of the reader was that *Commonweal* did not understand what true anti-Semitism was, and that Father Coughlin was not it.¹⁴⁴

Two weeks later, on May 19, *Commonweal* published another letter from a reader, this one directly responding to the letter published on May 5. To this second reader, “it is discouraging indeed to have someone wrongly accused” of being funded by Jews when his only crime is attempting to profess “the true principles of Christianity as expounded by Our Lord Himself.”¹⁴⁵ This type of mixed response is typical of *Commonweal*’s “Communications” section from 1939-1945. Many readers wrote in defending Coughlin and the Catholic Press, while many wrote to defend *Commonweal* and commend the magazine for having the courage to speak out against injustice.¹⁴⁶ This mixed response exhibits a clear divide amongst American Catholics during the 1940s: while some recognized the hostile anti-Semitism permeating their ranks, many were blind to it and continued to defend the stalwarts of persecution in the American Catholic community.

Perhaps the only thing left to discuss is whether any American Catholics called for support of suffering Jews or even honestly reported on the horrible crimes against humanity that were occurring daily in concentration camps, death camps, and killing fields across Europe.

¹⁴⁴ *Commonweal*, May 5, 1939, (43)

¹⁴⁵ *Commonweal*, May 19, 1939, (99)

¹⁴⁶ *Commonweal*, 12/2/1938 (269-7), 12/23/1938 (242), 3/24/1939 (605), 2/9/1940 (347), 6/1/1945 (166)

Fortunately, there were some that recognized the threat to German Jews and who were vocal in their condemnation of Nazi racial policies. After the war broke out in Europe, *Commonweal* smartly noticed that while Germany had a limited number of Jews, recently invaded Poland was made up of roughly three million Jews. This led the writers of the magazine to question what horrors were in store for the people of this recently occupied country.¹⁴⁷ This was just the beginning of *Commonweal*'s dramatic commitment to covering the struggles of Jews in Nazi occupied Poland that would last until 1945. The magazine began reporting on large scale Jewish murders in February 1940,¹⁴⁸ and the first in-depth discussion of the brutal conditions of Nazi concentration camps appeared in December 1940. These graphic descriptions included a story of an elderly man forced to do manual labor until a Nazi guard kicked him into the frozen water nearby. The author sadly remarks that the body of the man remained frozen in the water for days.¹⁴⁹

In 1942, *Commonweal* began reporting on the systematic Holocaust of the Jews that was occurring in Germany. "Mass executions and hunts through the streets happen daily in Poland...The Polish Jews have been shut behind the walls of ghettos where their population decreases alarmingly. The German aim is *no less than to exterminate the whole nation,*" (emphasis added).¹⁵⁰ Furthermore, *Commonweal* alerted its readers that Hitler had recently begun executing his plan "for the complete extermination of all Jews within the regions now controlled by him."¹⁵¹ On September 18, 1942, three months after the New York Times referred to a "vast slaughterhouse" where Jews were murdered,¹⁵² writers in *America* describe the number

¹⁴⁷ *Commonweal*, September 29, 1939 (505)

¹⁴⁸ *Commonweal*, February 2, 1940 (314-5)

¹⁴⁹ *Commonweal*, December 20, 1940, (228-9)

¹⁵⁰ *Commonweal*, October 2, 1942, (576)

¹⁵¹ *Commonweal*, December 11, 1942 (204)

¹⁵² Lipstadt, *Beyond Belief*, 248.

of Jews in concentration camps, and expose the Nazi plan of Jewish extermination for the first time. “Before World War II there were 8,500,000 Jews in the countries now occupied by the Nazis. Today it is estimated that less than 6,000,000 remain.”¹⁵³ The article goes on to discuss, in detail, the policies of German concentration camps and ghettos, while detailing the epidemics that ran wild in them. In March 1943, the newspaper’s writers editorialized that roughly five million Jews had been murdered at the hands of the Nazis. For the first time, an exact number had been given to qualify the genocide of the European Jews. Three months later, another editorial appeared further detailing the hideous war crimes of Hitler’s regime. Unlike earlier editions of the newspaper, which questioned the validity of reports from Germany, *America* disclaimed that “these things cannot be dismissed as ‘atrocities stories’” while noting the various atrocities against humanity committed:

“(1) Deprive the Jews of their civil rights; (2) drive the Jews out of economic life and thus make it impossible for them to sustain themselves; (3) segregate them in ghettos where they will perish of famine and disease; (4) exterminate those among them who have not been ‘liquidated’ in the course of the previous stages.”¹⁵⁴

Commonweal continued to expose the murder of the Jews throughout the 1940s. The Nazi policy in Germany was referred to as a “systematic mass slaughter,”¹⁵⁵ a “bestial mass murder,”¹⁵⁶ and Jews were reportedly being “mercilessly hunted in the streets.”¹⁵⁷ By 1944, *Commonweal* was reporting the death of over four million Jews, a number that was surprisingly close to an accurate count.¹⁵⁸ The same year, *America* summed up the disturbing news that was now flooding the American secular press by noting that “the memory aroused in the public

¹⁵³ *America*, September 18, 1942.

¹⁵⁴ *America*, June 12, 1943.

¹⁵⁵ *Commonweal*, February 19, 1943, (435)

¹⁵⁶ *Commonweal*, November 24, 1944, (145)

¹⁵⁷ *Commonweal*, July 30, 1943, (367)

¹⁵⁸ *Commonweal*, September 29, 1944, (565)

conscience by the outrages committed in these diabolically contrived infernos for torture and organized murder will hardly disappear.”¹⁵⁹

After Hitler’s death in 1945, a number of articles in *Commonweal* lamented that German anti-Semitism was allowed to reach such a critical mass resulting in the mass murder of so many Jews. All that was left was to search for a silver lining, which *Commonweal* did.

“It would be unbearable to think that the shouts of anguish and terror of the fourteen hundred Jews who were pushed into a synagogue in Lodz and burned alive there would not have an echo in the spiritual life of the world. It would be unbearable to think that out of the monstrous crimes committed by the Nazis there would be no flowering of mercy.”¹⁶⁰

Additionally, an article in March 1945 hoped that Jews would stop being seen as “others,” a quality that allowed the world to turn their backs while millions of Jews were being slaughtered mercilessly.¹⁶¹

It becomes clear that by 1942, American Catholics were keenly aware of the suffering of Jews, but few were actively petitioning against it. By June of that year, the World Jewish Congress had reported that Jews were being murdered at an alarming rate in camps across Europe, and the mainstream media covered those reports extensively. It would be impossible to argue that Catholics living in America were unaware of the murder of the Jews by 1942, as it would be impossible to argue that they were unaware of the persecution of Jews in the 1930s. As Lipstadt has shown in *Beyond Belief*, many secular newspapers in America covered the increasing anti-Semitism of the Nazi regime, and by the 1940s many were reporting the horrors of the camps. Catholics, however, were much more tepid in their response. While some, specifically the publishers and reporters of *Commonweal*, and later the reporters for *America*, were commendable - though delayed - in their response to the news of Nazi war crimes, others

¹⁵⁹ *America*, October 7, 1944.

¹⁶⁰ *Commonweal*, January 26, 1945, (368)

¹⁶¹ *Commonweal*, March 23, 1945, (559)

simply failed to respond adequately, or at all. Even those Catholics calling for support for Jews were simultaneously petitioning against the United States' entry into the Second World War. To them, the suffering of Jews was a horrible injustice, but entering the war was an equal injustice.

Conclusion

By analyzing four newspapers and their publications from 1933-1945, an image of the American Catholic social conscience, as it related to the Holocaust and the suffering of the Jews, begins to manifest itself. Until 1942, American Catholics greatly misunderstood the persecution of Jews in Germany and the rest of Europe. This is not to say, however, that there was no shift in the tone and content in which American Catholics discussed the treatment of the Jews in Europe from 1933 to 1945.

From 1933 to 1938, the first artificial period analyzed in this work, Catholics systematically downplayed the severity of rising German anti-Semitism. Signs of increased violence towards Jews went unnoticed and American Catholics were only concerned with cases of anti-religious sentiment in countries where Catholics were being persecuted. As a result, calls to help Jews were non-existent during this period.

The second time period explored in this paper, the days, weeks, and months immediately following the horrific events of *Kristallnacht*, did not bring about as many changes as would be expected. When the leaders of the Nazi party unleashed their soldiers against German Jews, arresting hundreds and killing 91, it would be reasonable to expect American Catholics, who in theory believe in helping the less fortunate no matter the cost, to speak out against the grave injustices faced by their religious compatriots. For the most part, this was not the case. While some Catholics saw the events of November 9 as a warning sign of impending genocide, most continued to ignore Jewish suffering in favor of Catholic persecution, continuously insisting that while Jews received the majority of attention from secular press sources (a claim proved shaky at best by Lipstadt in *Beyond Belief*) what Catholics were facing was without question a worse crime against religious rights. Shockingly, the events of *Kristallnacht* seemed to have little, if

any, effect on the way that Catholics viewed the severity of the persecution of the Jews in Germany - apart from one or two Catholic newspapers who understood and thought it necessary to petition for the Jews.

The final period of time analyzed in this work, 1939 to 1945, brought about a few changes in the perception of American Catholics, but as a group, they still failed to react responsibly to the ever increasing dangers facing European Jews. By 1942 the wheels of genocide had already been set into motion, and it was far too late for a grassroots movement of the American Catholic people to have any true effect. While some Catholics in America certainly pushed for activism regarding the treatment of the Jews by the middle of the 1940s, it was of course too late. All that was left for American Catholics to do was watch with horror as the Allied forces liberated camp after camp, exposing perhaps the worst crime against humanity in human history.

As has been previously mentioned, while a greater response from American Catholics would not have guaranteed a better outcome for 6 million Jews and 6 million other victims of Nazi persecution, it is certainly likely that more victims would have been saved from concentration and death camps. There is, however, another reason why this failure to act matters historically. The Catholic Church, both the American branch and the Vatican, prides itself on helping the less fortunate and promoting social justice. As a result, the lack of an appropriate response to the crimes against European Jewry represents not only a tremendous lapse in judgment but also a fundamental failure to uphold the Church's own professed values.

This type of study does not allow for an examination of motive, but two possible explanations seem to arise. First, it is possible that this misunderstanding was just that: a misunderstanding. American Catholics truly believed that reports of Jewish persecution were

greatly exaggerated, and honestly thought that anti-Catholic sentiment in Germany, Mexico, Spain, and Russia outweighed anti-Semitism in Germany. A second, more cynical possibility exists, and it is not completely without merits. Sadly, it is possible that American Catholics understood the severity of anti-Semitism in Germany, and chose to ignore it as a result of either anti-Semitism or simply a lack of compassion towards others. What can be said with certainty, however, is that by the time some American Catholics were ready to respond to Jewish persecution with the seriousness required for such a task, it was too late.

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