

What's Behind the  
"Christian Front"?

by

Norman Thomas



New York District  
Workers Defense League  
112 EAST 19th STREET  
NEW YORK CITY

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**NORMAN THOMAS**

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*Following is a revised copy of a speech delivered  
by NORMAN THOMAS over Station WEVD,  
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**T**HE VERY NAME "Christian Front" was unheard of in American politics until Father Coughlin began to talk about it. In one of his most widely discussed radio speeches, he set the Christian Front in opposition to what he called the "Communist Popular Front". A few days later in New York City, his magazine, "Social Justice", appeared on the streets, each copy carrying a leaflet announcing a great parade in support of Christianity and of social justice. This parade was called and sponsored by "all Christian factions" — a ridiculously false boast which meant only the Christian Front and its friendly rival, the Christian Mobilizers.

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

For reasons of his own, Father Coughlin ordered the cancellation of this parade, but not before it had become a matter of excited public discussion. The brief history of the Christian Front has filled us with foreboding. We are proud of New York's good name as a city of tolerance and mutual respect between men of many creeds and races.

Why? Not because we would deny to any group of citizens the American right to meet, parade or demonstrate peacefully. Certainly not because we hold in anything but honor the great word Christian which so many of us learned to love and reverence at our mother's knee.

A Christian front for social justice in these times of hate, fear and madness ought to fill us with new hope and joy. The Christian Front! If words have not been perverted from their meaning, that ought to be a magnificent body of men loyal to the faith which proclaims that God hath made of one blood all nations which dwell on the face of the earth. Its slogan should be the Golden Rule of those who seek to do unto others whatsoever they would have done unto them. In the name of its Master, the Car-

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

penter of Nazareth, the friend of the little children, the giver of rest to the weary and comfort to the broken-hearted, this front of His disciples should pledge themselves never to forsake their high and holy quest until they have rid this green and pleasant land of poverty, exploitation and war.

*"Not by words but by deeds . . ."*

Is it for those great ends that the members of the Christian Front have banded together. Some of them will answer "Yes. We march for social justice and for peace." But it has happened over and over in human history that under banners inscribed with justice, liberty and peace, some of the greatest crimes have been committed. Not by words but by deeds must our sincerity and understanding be judged.

Alas, the record of this Christian Front and its allies is clear. In its comparatively short life it has brought to our city not tolerance, but intolerance; not peace, but strife; not the democratic Americanism of Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln, but rather a brutal technique reminis-

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

cent of the black and brown shirts of Mussolini and Hitler, or the night shirts of our own discredited Ku Klux Klan.

Precisely what is the Christian Front? The public is in some doubt. The Christian Front was and is inspired by Father Coughlin despite his express denial of membership in or sponsorship of this or any other political organization. On July 30th, in the speech to which I have already referred, the radio priest praised it in extravagant terms. Its members sell Father Coughlin's magazine, "Social Justice".

Originally the Christian Front had its beginning under the aegis of the Paulist Fathers, but today it does not appear to be under ecclesiastical domination and it welcomes to membership Protestants as well as Catholics. It appears to have offshoots like the Christian Mobilizers in its own field. The Christian Front has other friends and there has been and is an exchange of ideas, speakers and possibly more active aid between it and half a dozen other semi-fascist organizations like the Silver Shirts, Crusaders and even the Nazi Bund itself.

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

For almost a year the Christian Front has maintained or helped maintain a picket line, Sunday after Sunday, rain or shine, around the studios of WMCA which has had difficulties with Coughlin broadcasts. More recently the picket line has been extended to stores which advertise over WMCA. Not long ago a certain Allen Zoll was indicted on the charge of trying to extort \$7,500 from WMCA for withdrawing this picket line. Overwhelming evidence shows that the picketers shout remarks like:

"This is a Christian country. Who isn't a Christian — throw him out."

"Americans in the Supreme Court."

"Buy Christian; vote Christian."

"Send Jews back where they came from — in leaky boats."

But the worst disturbances to the peace have been in connection with street meetings and the sale of "Social Justice." Let me make it emphatically plain that I support the right of the Christian Front and other Coughlinites to

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

hold meetings and to sell "Social Justice." What no honest and intelligent believer in true Americanism rather than Hitlerism can support is the kind of tactics they use.

### *"Storm-troopers" In America*

For months the sale of "Social Justice" — despite Father Coughlin's protest that he is only opposed to Jewish Communists, not to all Jews — has been attended by scurrilous and insulting remarks directed at Jews in general or particular Jewish passersby. Lately these remarks have been toned down. Nowadays the salesmen of "Social Justice" for the most part are boys and young women, but hovering nearby are a couple of strong-arm men who not only wait for trouble but in many instances provoke it themselves. Passersby who remonstrate with the salesman for some offensive remark are set upon by these Coughlinite "storm troopers." There have been many such assaults and several arrests. Conflicts have become more numerous recently since magazines, some to be sure Communist, some liberal and one at least Catholic, have been sold in competition with "Social Justice".

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

Some of the worst brawls arise out of street meetings — this in a city famous for many years for its tolerance of such meetings. On several occasions when Christian Front and similar meetings break up in the Bronx about 10 p.m., the mob — I can think of no other word — crowds into the subway along with "Social Justice" salesmen headed for Times Square. They run up and down the subway cars insulting passengers who look Jewish and create small terror. In Times Square they continue the tactics begun in the Bronx.

Recently James Wechsler in *The Nation* gave a circumstantial account of these things and described the attitude of some of the police and certain magistrates. On Sunday, July 30th, Father Coughlin in a clever and very inflammatory speech attacked *The Nation* and lumped it with the *Daily Worker* and the *New Masses*. In the multitude of his words there was no clear denial of the Wechsler charges or rebuke of the tactics of his followers. The orator did, indeed, dramatically refer to "a little girl" in his studio who "down on 14th Street in New York was almost murdered by a mob of three hundred Reds and Radicals last week

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

for attempting to sell 'Social Justice.' He should have sought justice for her in New York, not exploited her as a martyr in Royal Oak.

This street brawling is not to be tolerated whoever initiates it. But it is a simple statement of fact that for years it had been virtually unknown in New York until the appearance of the Christian Front and the development of the offensive tactics of the salesmen of "Social Justice".

I do not make these statements simply on the basis of Mr. Wechsler's article. I have checked the evidence myself and seen part of the mass of affidavits that has been collected.

Moreover I myself witnessed the extraordinary performance of the Christian Front and its allies in the hall of the Board of Education last winter when they demanded an end of free speech or discussion of controversial issues in public school auditoriums. The Hall was picketed outside and packed inside with men and women who Sunday after Sunday have demonstrated in favor of free speech on the radio. for Father Coughlin. Many of the pickets

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

were selling "Social Justice" and the *Brooklyn Tablet*. And when one of New York's noblest citizens remarked that Abraham Lincoln had used school houses as his forum, an hysterical woman in the back of the balcony shrieked: "Yes, and that's why they shot him." When I left before the hearing was over, I pulled off the front of the building one of the several red, white and blue stickers, left by these self-styled patriots, bidding us "Buy American! Buy Christian!" The performance was worthy of Munich during Hitler's rise to power.

Some months later at the great open air meeting in Jersey City celebrating the decision of the Supreme Court which gave magnificent support to the American Bill of Rights, it was vendors of "Social Justice" who alone tried to make trouble. I reported this incident to Father Coughlin in an open letter. To it he never replied. But a subordinate sent me a copy of printed instructions to vendors of "Social Justice" to avoid violence. Good as far as it goes, but not enough at a time when New York is enacting street scenes ominously reminiscent of the kind of thing that happened first in Italy and then in Germany.

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

Again, the Coughlinites must be judged by deeds, not alone by words. Is it possible that a priest of the Church by direction or indirection will want to encourage or condone that which in Germany has brought such woe to Catholic and Protestant lovers of freedom of religion as well as to the Jews?

Lately the newspapers have been breaking their policy of silence. We have read of the riot in the Bronx where a police captain was the victim of an attack by self-proclaimed Coughlinites. We have also read Magistrate Ford's denunciation of a woman seller of "Social Justice" for her insulting attacks on Jews. These stories corroborate and strengthen the charges against the Christian Front and its allies.

### *The "Red Herring"*

Already I can hear the answer that will be made to this: I shall be denounced as a Communist; possibly by the radio priest himself. And that one inclusive devastating word "Communist" will be supposed to demolish me along with

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

everything and everybody else whom Father Coughlin finds it easier to damn with a name rather than to answer.

Intelligent Americans know that I am a Socialist and not a Communist. I want democracy in industry, in our economic as well as our political life. "Government of the people, by the people and for the people" is already frustrated and cannot indefinitely co-exist with government of the workers, by the bosses, for the profits of absentee owners. To use our resources and machinery for the abundance we might have requires planning. That planning we can, if we will, make democratic and consistent with civil liberty and the dignity of the individual for which Christianity at its best has always stood. I am the foe of the totalitarian state, of the single, legal monolithic party, of dictatorship of the right or the left. I regard it as one of the great tragedies of the world that in so many important respects Stalin's concentration camps, his denials of liberty, his control of the press, the radio, the church and all associations resemble Hitler's.

I differ sharply from American Communists in foreign policy. I do indeed want the maximum cooperation of our

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

people with other peoples for justice and peace; but that is consistent with, nay, it requires, America's abstention from a war which can only bring military fascism and infinite suffering to 130,000,000 of us here without winning any more democracy for the world than we won in the first World War. But my desire for peace, from the days in 1918 and 1919 when I spoke for liberty on Irish-American platforms until now, has been consistent with hatred of tyranny throughout the world.

It is a fact, a fact in which I do not rejoice, that the *Daily Worker* has denounced me as roundly as ever it denounced Father Coughlin. I have now a controversy with the magazine *Equality* which distorted and misrepresented my open letter to Father Coughlin as few papers have misrepresented me in 25 years of political prominence.

I give this personal statement with reluctance, driven to it by the necessity of illustrating how false is the constant attempt of Father Coughlin and his followers to classify as Communists all those who shudder at the extraordinary parallel between his propaganda and Hitler's on the road

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

to power. That very trick of calling every critic Communist was Hitler's. More than once the deadly parallel column has shown the American priest's use not only of the ideas but the very words of the Nazi leaders who in their own country have persecuted priests and pastors for loyalty to Christianity almost as if they had been Jews.

*"I take the road to Fascism!"*

Back in 1936 when Father Coughlin was fighting Roosevelt in behalf of Lemke, Dale Kramer quoted him as saying, "One thing is sure. Democracy is doomed. This is our last election. It is fascism or communism. We are at the crossroads — I take the road to fascism."

I never happened to see that statement denied. Today I am well aware that Father Coughlin denies that he is a Fascist just as he denies that he is anti-Semitic. He mildly criticizes Hitler, but always explains that the Communists provoked the Fuehrer to his betrayals of liberty and humanity. Surely these more or less perfunctory denials mean little in the face of the ideological company the

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

radio priest keeps in America, his praise of Italy and Germany, and Nazi praise of him. He talks now about the CIO the way Hitler talked about unions before he came to power!

With all his extraordinary ability to make things vivid by the written and spoken word, Father Coughlin has never made his followers see or feel the spiritual impoverishment of a country which has driven so many of its noblest sons into exile and now is making homeless hundreds of thousands of loyal German citizens whose only crime is Jewish blood. He has drawn no picture of what purges, concentration camps, universal censorship, the God state to whom the individual is but a pawn mean in turning mankind back to new dark ages. No picture, that is, of oppression save in Russia.

He has at times eloquently professed his devotion to the common man and his opposition to the "wicked men who first concentrated wealth into the hands of the few." Yet today his wrath is almost wholly against Communists and John L. Lewis and the President whom he once sup-

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

ported but now finds little better than a Communist. So far his followers who boast that they are Christians act not in the spirit of Jesus of Nazareth but of Father Coughlin of Royal Oak. And he is the same priest who once at a Communion breakfast in New York extolled Mayor Walker and denounced Tammany's critics as he now denounces *The Nation*.

Such is the record of the Christian Front and their allies in New York. If these bitter words and violent acts continue something infinitely precious in our America will be wounded. The incarnate hate and fear which stalk the European continent will acquire new habitation among us. We shall have created by our own stupid and intolerant hates the bitterness and the oppression which our ancestors, men of many lands and faiths, came to this new land to escape.

Out of the seeds which the Christian Front and its allies are sowing — most of them must be forgiven for they know not what they do — our children and our children's children may still be harvesting the grapes of wrath. We

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

may in a few years lose what it has taken generations, — no, centuries — to win of tolerance, humanity and fellowship.

### *Not Too Late*

It is by no means too late for better things. The churches of America, Catholic and Protestant, can still protect Christianity from the curse of the totalitarian state. The workers of America, remembering that only in unity have they won victories over exploitation, can with their great authority rebuke once and for all any man or any movement which would set brother against brother because of race or creed or color.

Right now, in the present crisis, the City of New York is not in potent. Let the newspapers, soberly and fairly, set forth the truth about a situation which will not, as some good men have assumed, in "silence burn itself out." Hate and intolerance and their expression in violence grow on that on which they feed. Let the police and the magistrates vindicate public order which requires the abridgement of no true right of discussion.

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

Let leading citizens of all creeds and races unite to speak and act for the preservation of that fair and orderly discussion of issues which we had hoped was becoming more and more the ideal of the government and the people of this most cosmopolitan city in the world.

To the rank and file of the Christian Front itself and kindred organizations I dare with some hope address my appeal. You are Americans, proud of a liberty that many another nation covets in its despair. The word "democracy" is on your lips. It is a mockery unless understanding of it is in your minds and love of it in your hearts. You cannot defend democracy by the methods of the Klu Klux Klan which most of you hated. You cannot defend it by copying the intolerance and violence by which Hitler and Mussolini destroyed democracy. You are already defeated if you see no alternative to Communist dictatorship but fascist, and in the name of Americanism copy the methods which in Europe established the totalitarian state.

I am by no means recommending Stalin and Communism to you when I remind you that it is no fault of

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

theirs that one-third of our people are ill-fed, ill-clothed and ill-housed. You want security, jobs, homes instead of tenements, schools not starved by false economy. You want peace, justice, the right to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience. You want in larger measure that "comradeship which is life."

### *Abundance For All*

Educate for these things; demonstrate for these things; organize for these things. Ours is a fertile land. We have everything we need to produce abundance for all; everything, that is, except the spirit and the social organization to do it. It is not foreigners who keep us poor. To the Indians, we're all foreigners. Wealth, material and cultural, has come with immigrants, with their brains and their brawn. Into the making of America, into the weaving of the tapestry of our national life has gone something from Jew and Gentile, Catholic and Protestant, British, Swiss, Hollander, Irish, French, German, Czech, Pole, Magyar, Italian, Spaniard, Swede — the list is too long to recite. Men who in the centuries since Rome fell never

## WHAT'S BEHIND THE "CHRISTIAN FRONT"?

learned to be Europeans had learned in a few generations to be Americans. Now at this late date shall the many-colored tapestry of our national life be rent? Now, while together workers of every kind should be seeking the conquest of poverty and richer fulfillment for democracy, shall we go back to old tribal hates or curse ourselves with new wars of religion?

And — crowning infamy — shall this crime be committed in the name of liberty, social justice and the Christian Front?

Do I not speak for your hearts when I answer a thousand times *No*? What freedom, tolerance, democracy, fraternity we have, that we will keep. And thus blessed we shall press on until in all this broad land for all there shall be abundance, for all there shall be justice, and none shall make his brother afraid.

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