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Review:

***Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front*, Charles R. Gallagher**

Andrew Preston^{†*}

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*Correspondence: amp33@cam.ac.uk

[†]University of Cambridge, UK

Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front, Charles R. Gallagher (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021), ISBN 9780674983717, pp. 336, \$29.95, £26.95.

Because we are all prisoners of the past, every history book is, to some extent, inherently timely. But some are undoubtedly more timely than others, and Charles Gallagher's wonderful new book is definitely in this timelier category. While current and future generations will learn much about American history from *Nazis of Copley Square: The Forgotten Story of the Christian Front* – it is first and foremost a work of history – today it is impossible to read this book without the Trump presidency, and especially the events of 6 January 2021, in mind. Indeed, the past three decades of far-right militia activity and domestic terrorism make more sense after reading Gallagher's book. Yet even though Gallagher's beautifully written and deeply researched book is timely, it is also historically important in its own right. In other words, it is highly relevant, yet its scholarship does not rely on its contemporary relevance.

Nazis of Copley Square traces the rise and fall of the pro-German, anti-interventionist, anti-New Deal, and fiercely anti-communist Christian Front, first in its original base in New York, and then, after the leaders of the New York group were arrested, in Boston, until its downfall in 1943. These locations might seem surprising case studies for a history of interwar "isolationist" groups (for lack of a better word), but the book's central thread offers a clear explanation: New York and Boston were two of the most important centres of the American Catholic Church. The Christian Front was one of many organizations established in the late 1930s to build opposition to U.S. entry in the world war then brewing in Europe and Asia. Like other, better-known organizations, such as the America First Committee, the Christian Front took a decidedly anti-British and often antisemitic position on the world crisis. Its members arranged rallies and marches, printed pamphlets, and gave countless speeches in an effort to avert the nation's drift to war in support of the Allies. Despite some quiet sympathy and support for the Christian Front's politics, law enforcement in New York and then Boston eventually cracked down on its activities and effectively suppressed the group out of existence.

This story in itself is barely known, even though it was a major controversy at the time, and so one of Gallagher's chief contributions is a simple

act of historical recovery. But by exploring this missing dimension of fascism, he goes much further than this and provides a superb and persuasive analysis of interwar American contentious politics. Most notably, *Nazis of Copley Square* rests on a complex consideration of theological trends, specifically how two aspects of Catholic theology lent themselves to a certain strand of fascist politics that took root in the ideologically intense interwar era. Most historians of American religion are actually rather weak on theology and thus are blind to how theology influences political and social attitudes. This is a rather large methodological blind spot, but probably an understandable one considering that the vast majority of American religious historians (the present reviewer included) are not religiously trained. Nor are they so much interested in religion *qua* religion as they are in religion as a source or form of ideology, culture, politics, and so on. Gallagher, by contrast, is among the theologically learned – he is, after all, not just a history professor at Boston College but also a Jesuit priest – and he rightly argues that should “historians wish to shed light on the American religious right, they will have to become exegetes” (p. 5). He uses this knowledge to tremendous effect in drawing out how two aspects of Catholic doctrine (one known as the Mystical Body of Christ, the other as Catholic Action), now long dormant but widely accepted at the time, facilitated the emergence of the Christian Front.

Both doctrines allowed some American Catholics to justify fascist means to further anti-communist ends – as Gallagher shows, anti-communism was the Front’s driving force and the glue that bound everything in its world together. But given that the Christian Front was predominantly an Irish Catholic organization, a hatred of Britain was also a powerful motivator. Initially these American fascists were Nazi collaborators out of classic “the-enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend” logic. But they increasingly subscribed to violent conspiracy theories about “Judeo-Bolshevism”, and after the United States entered the war many of them, including their leader Francis P. Moran, became full-throated German sympathizers and endorsed the fully antisemitic and “exterminationist” aspects of Nazi ideology. Nonetheless, U.S. entry into the war also spelled the end of the Christian Front, as they were now outright traitors whom the Catholic Church and the local police could quietly tolerate no longer.

Nazis of Copley Square is an arrestingly original book, both a gripping

story and a shrewd historical analysis; as an internal critique of Catholic complicity in American fascism, it is also a courageous act. Historians of American religion, politics, and foreign relations are all in Gallagher's debt.

*Andrew Preston
University of Cambridge*