

Catholic Americanisms and Antisemitism

From Kristallnacht to Nostra Aetate

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United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

July 20, 2026

Web version. Modified from the talk as delivered: two images removed for rights reasons; one vote count corrected.

NOVEMBER 1938

The dueling broadcasts



Rev. Maurice Sheehy. American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives (ACUA), The Catholic University of America.

CATHOLICS OF U. S. SCORE 'ATROCITIES'

Nazi 'Cancer' Denounced by Prelates -
Smith Joins in Praising Roosevelt Stand

'The texts of the speeches on the broadcast are on Page 6.'

New York Times, November 17, 1938, p. 1.

Headline transcribed from the New York Times, November 17, 1938, p. 1. Page image not reproduced in this version.

Two Catholic Americanisms, c. 1938–1965

Defensive Catholic Americanism	Pluralist Catholic Americanism
Representative figures Charles Coughlin, Edward Lodge Curran, Christian Front leadership	Representative figures John A. Ryan, Maurice Sheehy, George Higgins
Primary concern Defending the Church against Communism	Primary concern Catholic social teaching, pluralism, and democratic cooperation
View of Jews Jews linked to Communism; theological supersession reinforced by political conspiracy	View of Jews Shared Abrahamic heritage; Catholic prejudice seen as incompatible with Christian teaching
Primary medium Mass broadcasting and populist mobilization	Primary medium Institutions, correspondence, policy, and episcopal networks
Institutional expression Christian Front; <i>Social Justice</i>	Institutional expression NCWC Social Action Department; Catholic University; Vatican II
Political style Siege, exclusion, anti-Communist nationalism	Political style Dialogue, labor cooperation, civic pluralism
Historical trajectory Sheds overt antisemitism after WWII; flows into mainstream Cold War anti-Communism	Historical trajectory Culminates in the U.S. Bishops' <i>Guidelines</i> (1967), the American reception of <i>Nostra Aetate</i> (1965)

These are analytical poles, not fixed camps. Most American Catholics lived on the braid between them, and the two traditions competed to define what it meant to be both Catholic and American.

NOVEMBER 20, 1938

“Persecution, Jewish and Christian”



“Thus, Nazism was conceived as a political defense mechanism against communism and was ushered into existence as a result of communism.”

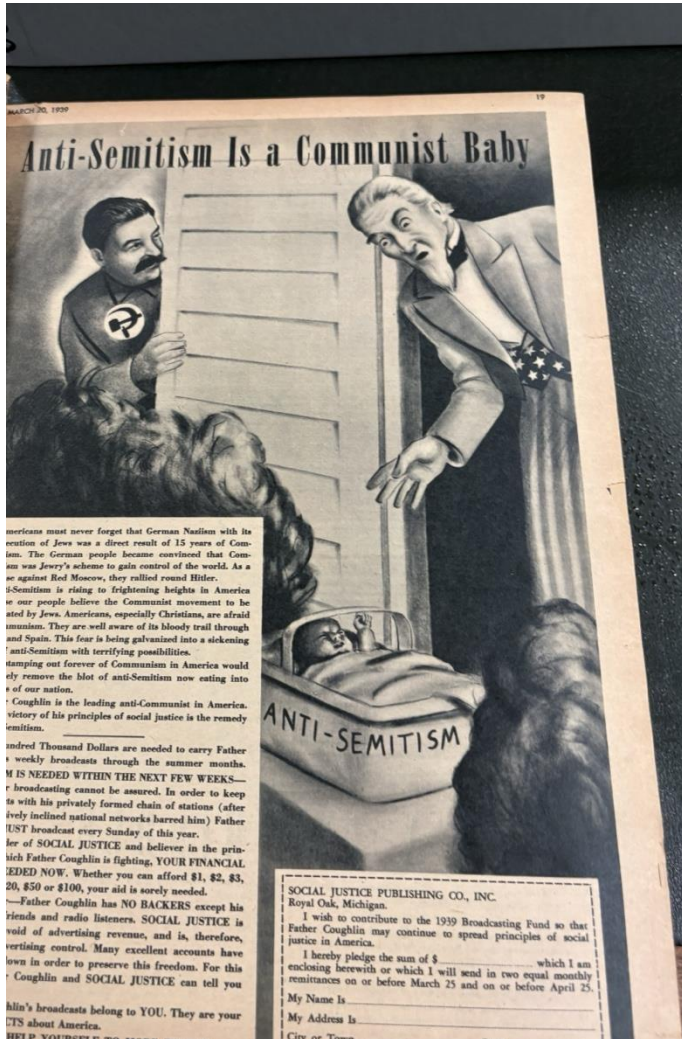
Fr. Charles Coughlin, radio broadcast, November 20, 1938

- The premise is asserted, never argued.
- Persecution is reframed as self-defense: listeners are asked only to understand.
- The materials are Catholic, not imported from Berlin.

Social Justice, March 6, 1939, quoting Coughlin's February 19 broadcast. ACUA.

MARCH 20, 1939

“Anti-Semitism Is a Communist Baby”



*Communism was “Jewry’s scheme to gain control of the world” —
so the German people “rallied round Hitler,” —
and the “remedy for anti-Semitism” is to stamp out Communism.*

The equation Jews = Communism is never argued anywhere on the page. The baby makes the hatred no one’s fault. Uncle Sam’s recoil is an alibi, and the bottom third of the page is a fundraising coupon.

AFTER 1942

The fork: two afterlives

Underground

“The Christian Front will go on, even undercover if necessary.”

Francis Moran, Boston. The Friday Group: weekly meetings in private homes, a remnant cell where the ideology was refined, not abandoned.

Respectable

The same fear given a cleaner object.

The certainty about a communist enemy flowed into a Cold War anticommunism that no longer needed Jewish people to name as its enemy. The Brooklyn Tablet, 1930s to 1950s: the same enemy with the Jew removed.

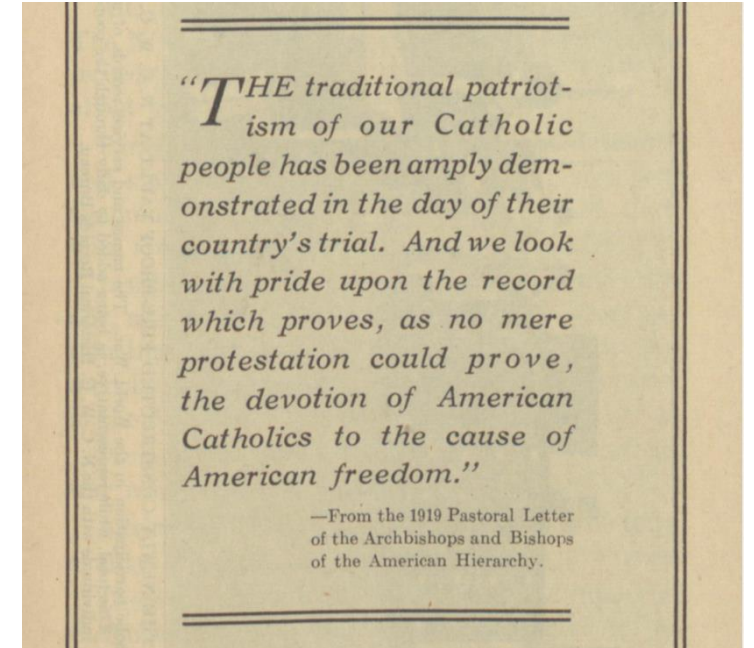
1919

The Social Action Department, from Ryan to Higgins



The pluralist strain found something sturdier than a voice. It found a department: an institution, a staff, and a filing cabinet, all now at Catholic University.

- Ryan: architect, A Living Wage, Bishops' Program of 1919
- Haas: the doer, 1,500 strikes mediated
- Higgins: director, 1954–1967, from the shop floor to the Council



From the 1919 Pastoral Letter, in an NCWC Bureau of Historical Records pamphlet. ACUA.

Msgr. George G. Higgins, with portrait of John A. Ryan. ACUA, The Catholic University of America.

OCTOBER 28, 1965

Nostra aetate



The Church “decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone.”

Nostra aetate §4, approved 2,221 to 88

Its sister document, Dignitatis Humanae: Murray is to religious freedom what Higgins is to the Jews.

Marc Tanenbaum and Zachariah Shuster



AJC American Jewish Committee

In Our Time: AJC and Nostra Aetate (American Jewish Committee).



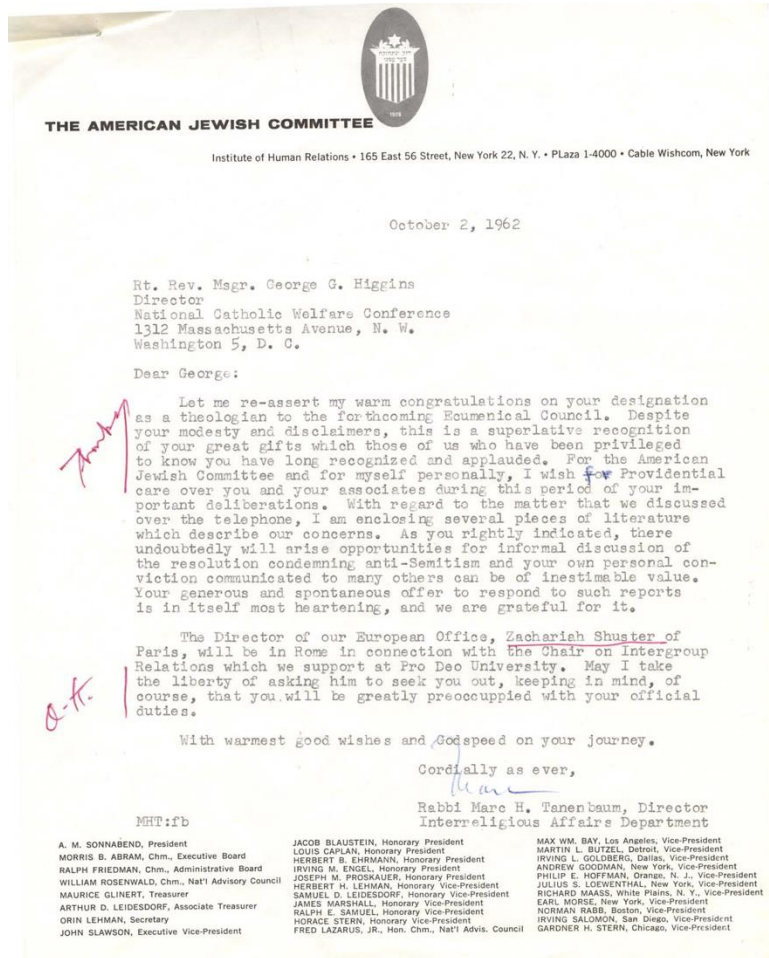
AJC delegation with Paul VI, 1964; Zachariah Shuster at far right. American Jewish Committee.



Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum with John Paul II, 1985. American Jewish Committee.

OCTOBER 1962

The correspondence: the channel opens



Higgins's "own personal conviction communicated to many others can be of inestimable value."

Tanenbaum congratulates Higgins on his appointment as peritus and introduces Zachariah Shuster, asking permission to have him "seek you out" in Rome.

Two days later, Higgins accepts: he will "be on the lookout for opportunities to put it to the best possible use."

MAY 1964

Request and reply

May 15, 1964

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum
The American Jewish Committee
165 East 56th Street
New York 22, New York

Dear Marc:

At your convenience, would you be kind enough to send me some reliable statistical information about the extent of the Nazi persecution and massacre of the Jews of Europe. If possible, please send information from non-Jewish sources. I need this material as ammunition in a private little war I am carrying on with a friend of mine who, even at this late date, continues to argue, against all of the evidence, that the extent of the persecution of the Jews by the Nazis has been greatly exaggerated.

Written in great haste as I prepare to leave for a series of meetings in Colorado.

Higgins to Tanenbaum, May 15, 1964: "reliable statistical information about the extent of the Nazi persecution and massacre of the Jews of Europe... if possible... from non-Jewish sources." Higgins Papers, ACUA.

THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE

Institute of Human Relations • 165 East 56 Street, New York 22, N. Y. • PLaza 1-4000 • Cable Wishcom, New York

May 20, 1964

Rt. Reverend Monsignor George G. Higgins
Director
National Catholic Welfare Conference
1312 Massachusetts Avenue
Washington, D. C. 20005

Dear George:

Thank you for your interesting letter of May 15.

Enclosed are several documents from non-Jewish sources, in the main, which I think will serve the purpose that you describe.

If I can be of any additional help please let me know.
Warm regards.

Cordially,

Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, Director
Interreligious Affairs Department

Tanenbaum's reply, May 20, 1964: "several documents from non-Jewish sources... which I think will serve the purpose that you describe." Higgins Papers, ACUA.

MARCH 1, 1967

From Declaration to Diocese

GUIDELINES FOR CATHOLIC-JEWISH RELATIONS

“Responding to the urgency of the Conciliar Statement on the Jews...”

- Every diocese where Jews and Catholics live is to assign someone to Catholic-Jewish affairs.
- School texts, prayerbooks, and preaching to be examined and cleared.
- The Crucifixion presented without collective guilt.
- “A frank and honest treatment of the history of Christian anti-Semitism.”
- Serious scholarship funded, by Catholic and Jewish scholars together.

Subcommittee for Catholic-Jewish Relations, U.S. Bishops’ Committee for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, sixteen months after the Council closed.

November 20, 1975

The NCCB Statement on Catholic-Jewish Relations reaffirms the Declaration and the Guidelines, names the de-Judaizing habit running through Christian teaching since the third century, and calls the work of understanding the bond between Church and Synagogue a task

“as yet hardly begun.”

November 20, 1938

The defensive strain needed the radio, the crowd, and the enemy.

Only one of them was still speaking.

November 20, 1975

The pluralist strain needed only what it had always had: an institution that kept working after the applause ended.