

# RELIGION, CULTURE, AND THE COLD WAR: BISHOP FULTON J. SHEEN AND AMERICA'S ANTI-COMMUNIST CRUSADE OF THE 1950s

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COLD WAR CRUSADER Bishop Fulton J. Sheen used television to attract millions of viewers to his battle against communism. His prime-time show enjoyed unprecedented popularity for all shows on the new medium, resulting in his making the cover of such major publications as *TV Guide*, *Colliers*, *Look*, and *Time* magazines. By the time his television show ended in 1957, a national poll listed Sheen as one of the top ten public figures in America. Upon his death in 1979, the *New York Times* stated that Sheen had been “one of the most effective evangelists that the broadcasting era had produced.” Although Sheen’s popularity was arguably higher than that of any other religious figure during the “Fifties Revival,” the impact of his assertion that religion and patriotism were crucial to a new U.S. cultural consensus and global primacy has yet to be fully explored and contextualized within the literature.<sup>1</sup>

This article will address Sheen’s anti-communism within the context of his widespread popularity and influence on the evolving culture of the Cold War. While this article is not a definitive analysis of Sheen’s religious impact on post-World War II America, it will serve to locate him and contemporary religious figures squarely within the field of cultural and Cold War studies. In that regard,

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1. Since Fulton J. Sheen failed to preserve his papers for later generations of researchers, his numerous writings and media records remain the best source of his anti-communist crusade.

this article will suggest reasons for a sustained scholarly analysis of the role religion played in the United States during the early years of the Cold War and in the shaping of the distinctive cultural values of that era, issues that reflect key questions of how and why domestic phenomena influence policy decisions.

The role of religion in Cold-War chronicles demands careful and ongoing investigation. As John Lewis Gaddis argues in *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History*, the first generation of Cold War scholars concentrated on conventionally defined events and neglected other areas of causation. Gaddis finds this historiography of common characteristics producing “one sided disproportionate attention” to the historian’s persistent focus on “the United States, its allies, and its clients,” while in the process neglecting other interests and ideas—“what people believed or wanted to believe.”<sup>2</sup> In Gaddis’s view, these “deficiencies” will give way to more encompassing interpretations of the Cold War as the “stream of time” places the complexities of the Cold War “within a broader comparative framework. . . .”<sup>3</sup> While not speaking specifically to religion’s influence on the Cold War culture, Gaddis does remind scholars that such neglected elements of Cold War influences as religion should be profoundly analyzed and subsequently given a proper place in the scholarship of causation.<sup>4</sup>

Sheen is one of several prominent religious figures who effectively conflated ideological struggles and moral questions by equating the turmoil between East and West with the biblical Apocalypse. Religious and cultural upheaval swept America in the 1950s, and again in the late 1970s and early 1980s, deeply embedding these beliefs in the American cultural fabric. The surge of religiosity carried with it a call for renewed patriotism and piety to meet global tensions. The question arises, then: How much did prominent religious leaders and their values influence policy during the Cold War? Such explorations are critical for understanding if and why the 1950s witnessed an actual intermingling of religion, culture, and foreign policy.

Since the 1990s, the field of history has undergone a notable shift from the traditional political approach to a more encompassing picture of the causes and directions of foreign relations, yet this transformation largely neglected religious influences. The evolving approach to the history of American foreign relations has instead focused on new areas such as gender and diversity, or domestic factors,

2. John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 282.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

such as culture. Even the fresh discussions on culture have tended to concentrate on, as Harvard Professor Akira Iriye has noted, a “perspective that pays particular attention to communication within and among nations.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, while the field of history has recently produced significant new works meeting Gaddis’s demands for fresh perspectives, religion and its impact on culture remain conspicuously absent from those discussions.

Noted scholar Sydney Ahlstrom has argued that “the moral and spiritual development of the American people is one of the most intensely relevant [to scholarship] subjects on the face of the earth.”<sup>6</sup> From Puritan theocracy in the 1630s to the religious right of the new millennium, faith has often played a role in shaping Americans’ attitudes toward foreign relations, including perceived domestic threats, communist hegemony, and international terrorism. In the post-World War II era of domestic reconciliation to atomic weapons, decolonization, Soviet hegemony, and a new American globalism, the United States reembraced theology to such an extent that neoorthodoxy permeated the life and culture of America in what prominent theologian and author Will Herberg termed as the new “American Way of Life.”<sup>7</sup> Writing in *U.S. Diplomacy since 1900*, Robert D. Schulzinger used less generous words, as he found that the cultural consensus of the period came at a “cost of silence and social conformity.”<sup>8</sup> Scholars and laypersons alike have frequently termed this decade as the “Fifties Revival.” This phenomenon proved a watershed in the extension of spiritual forces on the Cold War consensus and strategies, most notably in casting the battle between East and West as one of good versus evil, Godly versus Godless. A review of Bishop Sheen’s deft use of the exploding popular medium of television in the 1950s to underscore patriotism and to attack “Godless” communism goes far toward illustrating these points.

In the 1950s, Fulton J. Sheen (1895–1979), Auxiliary Bishop of New York, best-selling author, and lifelong conservative, arose as *the* Catholic spokesman on

5. Thomas G. Paterson, “A Round Table: Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations,” *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990), 93–98; Akira Iriye, “Culture,” *Journal of American History* 77 (June 1990), 99–107, quote 99.

6. Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1972), xiii.

7. Will Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1955), 75–90.

8. Robert D. Schulzinger, *U.S. Diplomacy since 1900*, 5th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 251; some polls in the 1950s found almost 75 percent of Americans identifying with church membership. See “I Believe . . .,” *Newsweek*, 20 October 1952, 106; “The Proof of God,” *Time*, 10 January 1955, 60; Douglas T. Miller, “Popular Religion of the 1950’s: Norman Vincent Peale and Billy Graham,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 9 (1975): 66–76.

the Cold War. Even prior to the onset of the Cold War, Sheen had devoted a large portion of his life to saving America from the “counterfeit philosophy” of communism. A devotee of the great medieval scholar of reason and faith, St. Thomas Aquinas, Sheen often cast himself as a crusader.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the crusaders of the Middle Ages set off to save the Holy Land from the infidel Muslims, Sheen set out to save Western civilization from “Godless communism.” Although Sheen often attempted to win over his audiences through religious doctrine and theoretical analysis, in reality he offered little new insight into U.S. foreign policy. Nonetheless, Sheen’s long-standing elevation of communism above all other threats (e.g., secularism, liberalism, and modernism) defined his popular appeal in the postwar generation.

For Sheen, the Soviet juggernaut represented the new postwar threat and the final stage of the degeneration of Western society. As Sheen once stated:

[I]t [the Soviet state] is more than a system of economics: it is a religion. But as a religion it is not heresy within Christendom, it is the ape of Christianity; like it in all externals, but differing in its spirit. It too has a Bible, which is “Das Kapital” of Karl Marx: it has its original sin, which is capitalism; it has its Messianic hope, which is the classless class and the godless race; it has its law of sacrifice, which is class struggle; and it has its priesthood, which is the commissariat. It is like Christianity in all things save one; it is inspired not by the spirit of Christ but by the spirit of the serpent.<sup>10</sup>

Sheen thus viewed communism as Satan’s answer to religion. It was an insidious ideology that attempted to create an *ersatz* religion to replace Christianity. In his view, communism could not be allowed to spread from the East into the West. The most effective way to prevent this was for Western society to return to its Christian

9. See Fulton J. Sheen, “The Mystical Body: The Church and Communism” (paper presented to the National Conference of Catholic Charities, Peoria, Ill., 1 October 1935), Fulton J. Sheen Archives (hereafter Sheen Archives), Archdiocese of Rochester, Rochester, N.Y.; his published doctoral dissertation, *God and Intelligence in Modern Philosophy: A Critical Study in the Light of the Philosophy of St. Thomas* (London: Longmans, Green, 1952), and his *Treasure in Clay: The Autobiography of Fulton J. Sheen* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980), 82–92; Fulton J. Sheen, *Old Errors and New Labels* (New York: The Century Company, 1931), 119–49, 213; Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anticomunism* (New York: Free Press, 1995), 194, 250; the first four chapters of Christopher Owen Lynch’s *Selling Catholicism: Bishop Sheen and the Power of Television* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998) describe Sheen’s medieval intellectual roots. Kathleen Riley’s “Bishop Fulton J. Sheen: An American Catholic Response to the Twentieth Century” (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1988) provides insight into the Bishop’s lifetime of attacks on communism; see especially 217–53.

10. Sheen, “The Mystical Body,” 18.

foundation. Instead of wielding physical weapons as the medieval crusaders had used against the forces of Islam, Sheen used religious argumentation to derail the Red threat. He was not alone in spreading this message of rectitude in the conformist and burgeoning mass media decade of the 1950s.

During the 1930s, when Sheen first brought his Christian crusade to the radio via the *Catholic Hour*, another priest courted similar national attention. Father Charles Coughlin broadcast his own popular radio show from the Shrine of the Little Flower located in the working-class suburbs of Detroit. In the beginning of his radio ministry, Coughlin preached Catholic doctrine but often interlaced these discussions with anti-Semitic and anti-communist diatribes and related political proselytizing. At this time, Sheen began to take his own media stand against communism, quickly replacing Coughlin as America's "radio priest."

Sheen tried to reason with his audience about communism, but occasionally interjected his own provocations to rouse emotions against it. As his idol St. Thomas Aquinas had argued, appealing to both intellect and emotions was necessary. Sheen's beliefs at that time could be reduced to one truism: If he could reach his audiences through their minds and hearts, they and their leaders would be likely to counter the specter of communism. Noting Sheen's tenth anniversary on the *Catholic Hour*, *Time* magazine described him as "a persuasive, lucid speaker," who possessed an eloquent broadcast voice that made his message "sensible and attractive" to millions of listeners.<sup>11</sup>

At the height of its popularity, the show resulted in hundreds of thousands of letters monthly. Sheen estimated that the program had increased from its initial seventeen-station syndicate to 118 NBC affiliates by the early 1950s, and drew a weekly U.S. audience of perhaps four million listeners.<sup>12</sup> He effectively used this radio program as part of his nationwide anti-communism crusade and as a segue to his crowning achievement via the new medium of television. Sheen's pretelevision experiences suggest that his long-held beliefs in moral lessons and opposition to Godless communism played a key role in catapulting him into television and cultural stardom in the tension-filled decade of the 1950s.

During Sheen's pretelevision era, he had often focused on events in Europe. He repeatedly stated that he did not approve of Benito Mussolini or Adolf Hitler, but even so, his major concern centered on the "insidious ideology" of Josef Stalin and

11. "Monsignor's Tenth," *Time*, 11 March 1940, 60–61.

12. Gretta Palmer, "Bishop Fulton J. Sheen," *Catholic Digest*, October 1951, 60; Daniel P. Noonan, *The Passion of Fulton Sheen* (New York: Dodd Mead, 1972), 52. Noonan does not give the time frame for the three-month period, but used it to point out Sheen's popularity. See Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 64, 72, 359.

his Communist state.<sup>13</sup> Sheen condemned the fascist dictators, particularly Hitler, but never with the vehemence that he reserved for Stalin. In his view, atheistic communism presented a far greater danger to Western society than authoritarian fascism. Sheen continually warned that the Soviet Union could not be trusted, and pointed to the Non-Aggression Pact signed between Germany and the Soviet Union in August 1939 as proof of communist perfidy.

Predictably, Sheen criticized the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union. Prior to that association, Sheen had insisted that the Soviets allowed religious freedom as a precondition for receiving aid from America. He often asserted that the American public and Washington were being deceived by pro-Soviet propaganda. Sheen later maintained that the American government tried to censor his broadcasts to prevent him from condemning the Soviet Union, although there is little evidence of that. He continued to speak out on the *Catholic Hour*, but prudently chose topics other than communism. As the war subsided and Cold War anxieties erupted, Sheen resurrected his anti-communism crusade, much of which he encapsulated in a 1948 book, *Communism and the Conscience of the West*. As the *New York Times* opined, the book provided Sheen with “the stature of a prophet.”<sup>14</sup> Shortly after publication of his popular indictment of communism, Sheen reiterated the message in a program before the U.S. House of Representatives, furthering and underscoring his growing public persona and the rise of religious influence over secular institutions in the postwar era.<sup>15</sup>

Sheen’s renewed anti-communist thrust coincided with the onset of a domestic Cold War culture. It also coincided with Americans flocking to religious leaders and groups, possibly as one way to avoid suspicion of their being “soft on communism.” Whatever the motivation, Americans embarked on an unprecedented wave of religiosity in the 1950s, and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen capitalized on it in a most effective way. The percentages of Americans claiming religious ties rose from less than 50 percent in the 1940s to almost 70 percent in the 1950s. Churches and synagogues became mainstays of the blossoming suburbs in the era, as radio stations concurrently expanded and began to broadcast numerous faith-

13. Quote in “Keep the Spanish Embargo Mass Meeting,” Program of meeting, 9 January 1939, Sheen Archives.

14. Fulton J. Sheen to General Douglas MacArthur, 13 August 1948, Sheen Archives; Fulton J. Sheen, *Communism and the Conscience of the West* (Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs Merrill, 1948); *New York Times Book Review*, 18 April 1949, 7.

15. *Congressional Record*, 80th Cong., 2nd sess., Vol. 94, part 3 (March 16-April 8, 1948), 3701-02.

based songs such as *It's No Secret What God Can Do* and *Vaya Con Dios* ("Go with God") to eager listeners across the land. Not to be left behind in the new cultural religiosity, Hollywood produced such blockbuster movies in the 1950s as *The Robe*, *Ben Hur*, and Cecil B. De Mille's classic *The Ten Commandments*, all of which glorified moral righteousness against godless tyrants. As the decade unfolded, Americans most certainly affixed the face of communism onto these cinematic tyrants.<sup>16</sup>

The complex beginning and development of this view as the "American way of life" has been the focus of numerous studies, including those of Stephen J. Whitfield, Elaine Tyler May, Paul Boyer, Michael Barson, Peter Kuznick, and Larry May. Other authors have focused on the role of the American media in promoting "Sovietphobia" and advancing a Cold War consensus, as for instance represented in Walter L. Hixson's analysis of Cold War propaganda, and by Nancy Bernhard's disclosure that television news producers covertly promoted Washington's Cold-War views in efforts to attract audiences. Conversely, few studies have focused on the specific role of religion and the media in the growing Cold War consensus, and even fewer studies have sought to assess the rising role of Catholicism in shaping the new cultural religiosity and perhaps even the foreign policies of the United States in the 1950s.<sup>17</sup>

Many of these recent works suggest that Catholic and Protestant "pop stars" boldly shaped American public life—including prevalent images of the Soviet East. This resulted from the pervasive American fear of military confrontation and a nostalgic longing for more serene and secure times. These were the types of

16. See Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 83.

17. Ibid.; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1988); Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at The Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Michael Barson and Steven Heller, *Red Scared: The Commie Menace in Propaganda and Popular Culture* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2001); Peter Kuznick and James Gilbert, eds., *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001); Larry May, *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Walter Hixson, *Parting the Curtain: Propaganda, Culture and the Cold War, 1945–1961* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); and Nancy Bernhard, *U.S. Television News and Cold War Propaganda, 1947–1960* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). The notable scholars who have produced works addressing the role of Catholicism in influencing the culture and foreign policy of the 1950s would include: Paul Blanshard, *Communism, Democracy, and Catholic Power* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1972); John T. McGreevy, "Thinking on One's Own: Catholicism in the American Intellectual Imagination, 1928–1960," *Journal of American History* 84 (1997): 97–131; John T. McGreevy, *Catholicism and American Freedom: A History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003).

consensus issues notably conducive to the rise of “fatherly and wise” anti-communist crusaders, such as Bishop Sheen. As a result, his message of restoring old-time values, peace, and security through the vanquishing of the Red atheists helped sway the American public precisely when the Cold War culture reached its zenith of mass conformity.

Not only did Bishop Sheen contribute in his inimitable way to the mass pressures for Cold War culture and conformity, but as Stephen J. Whitfield has recorded in *The Culture of the Cold War*, the priest also benefited greatly from the “special atmosphere” of the Cold War in the 1950s.<sup>18</sup> This atmosphere encompassed a distrust of the media, lambasting of communism, and the cultural equation of Red bashing to patriotism. The postwar period and the ensuing stalemate in Korea (often viewed as a proxy conflict between the communist and the free world) of the early 1950s created a hyperpatriotic climate that brought a renewed following to Sheen’s patriotic crusade against Godless communism. Sheen’s zeal led him to set a popular yet distinctive course—one blending religious appeal and Cold War fanaticism—to stop the spread of communism and to save Western humanity. So relentlessly did Sheen attack communism in the 1950s that perhaps a third of his addresses zeroed in on the “Red Menace.”<sup>19</sup>

Bishop Sheen undertook this crusade during an auspicious time for American Catholics, as they began to shed their mantle of authoritarianism and obedience to the Roman Curia in favor of a new mass appeal. The restriction of immigration in the 1920s stabilized the percentage of Catholics and Protestants in post-World War I America, in the process perhaps tempering the Protestants’ fear that Catholics would someday outnumber them. John T. McGreevy and Andrew Greeley have, nevertheless, presented two of the stronger arguments that even after World War II, prejudice continued to hinder Catholic attempts to achieve social and political equality. Other historians have argued that beginning with the Second World War, a transformation began to take place in America, which led to wider acceptance of Catholics and a greater upward social mobility for them. Even so, McGreevy in particular has demonstrated that many of the era’s notable intellectuals, such as McGeorge Bundy, John Dewey, and Albert Einstein, supported popular writer Paul Blanshard’s calls to eliminate the “Catholic problem.” In the face of this lingering anti-Catholicism, the Church set out to reshape its image as that of bedrock America, and Sheen’s

18. Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 170–72.

19. See Riley, “Bishop Fulton J. Sheen,” 270–71.

unrelenting crusade of the 1950s served as one of the lynchpins in the Church's extended mass appeal in that decade.<sup>20</sup>

One researcher has aptly termed this movement a desire for the Catholic Church to become "chaplains to the nation's crusades."<sup>21</sup> Another student of the times has noted that the era marked "a giant awakening from a sleep," as the number of Catholics in the United States doubled, reaching a peak of thirty-two million by the mid-1950s. By 1960, Catholics had so insinuated themselves into the American mainstream that they moved from having virtually no influence in Congress to 12 percent of the Senate, and roughly 30 percent of the House membership. As John McGreevy has argued, the 1960 election of President John F. Kennedy, the scion of a high-profile Catholic clan, finally ended much of the surviving anti-Catholicism.<sup>22</sup> Like the new cultural hero JFK, Sheen stood at the forefront of the growing acceptability of Catholicism. He demonstrated in his broadcasts that Catholics shared America's concerns for the major issues of the day—flag veneration and resistance to communist denigration. An examination of Fulton J. Sheen's rise to popularity in the mainstream media of the 1950s sheds critical light on the Catholic Church's success in mining one of the leading indicators of "true Americanism" in the post-World War II years, namely the branding of the Church itself with the pervasive Red excoriation of the era.

By 1952, Sheen, now auxiliary bishop of New York, had accrued enough fame and recognition from his best-selling books and media presentations to justify a prime-time television program, *Life Is Worth Living*. Sheen's groundbreaking program attracted viewers from all backgrounds, including Protestants and Jews. According to audience analysis data from the 1950s, his telecasts reached a diverse audience of thirty million, easily gaining more acclaim than any other broadcast

20. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History*, 1002; McGreevy, "Thinking on One's Own," 97–98; Andrew M. Greeley, *An Ugly Little Secret: Anti-Catholicism in North America* (Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed Andrews and McMeel, 1977). William Halsey argued this point in *The Survival of American Innocence: Catholicism in an Era of Disillusionment, 1920–1940* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1980), 3–7; see also Paul Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power*, 2nd. Rev. Ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958 [1949]), and his *Communism, Democracy, and Catholic Power*.
21. Mark S. Massa, *Catholics and American Culture: Fulton Sheen, Dorothy Day, and the Notre Dame Football Team* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Co., 1999), 2.
22. Patrick W. Carey, *The Roman Catholics in America* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 108–09; Thomas McAvoy, *A History of the Catholic Church in the United States* (South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1969), 445; James Hennesey, *American Catholics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 283–84; John Ellis Tracy, "American Catholicism, 1953–1979: A Notable Change," *Thought* 54. 213 (1979): 115. See Thomas Carty, *A Catholic in the White House?: Religion, Politics, and John F. Kennedy's Presidential Campaign* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), especially 113–27.

or religious figure of the decade. The show reached millions of households weekly on 123 television stations. Another three hundred radio stations played the voice segment. The show also elicited over eight thousand fan letters a week.<sup>23</sup> The popularity of this program helped further acceptance of Catholics into material society, with Sheen demonstrating that his church shared America's pressing concerns of the 1950s, including those about pride in country and abhorrence of the Soviets. American suspicion of communism, coupled with a renewed emphasis on religion, empowered the new televangelist to help move Catholic viewpoints into the public forum, and at the same time promote and shape the collective behavior now termed the Cold War consensus.

Sharing Sheen's suspicion of Red intentions and domestic intrigue, Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wis.) gained widespread notoriety in the early 1950s, as diplomatic scholar Walter LaFeber has noted, by using the Korean quagmire and related tensions to claim a massive Red infiltration of the U.S. government. McCarthy finally went too far in his televised Senate hearings when he identified the U.S. Army as yet another haven for communists. At this point, President Dwight D. Eisenhower, a graduate of West Point and Supreme Allied Commander of the European theater during World War II, found McCarthy "close to disgusting" and instructed his aides to allow the demagogue to self-destruct. Subsequently, Eisenhower, who had at first refused to repudiate McCarthy, stood on the sidelines as the Senate voted in 1954 to condemn McCarthy and his tactics. The Senate actions abruptly ended McCarthy's notoriety and sent the senator into obscurity. In retrospect, "Tail Gunner Joe's" tirade banished him to ignominy, but the continuous coverage of McCarthy on television had cast him as a protagonist of the Red Scare and demonstrated in the process the power of this new medium to dominate the cultural exchanges of the era.<sup>24</sup>

23. Massa, *Catholics and American Culture*, quote on 2, 93, 94; James C. G. Conniff, "Bishop Sheen's TV Show," *Catholic Digest*, November 1953, 7; Keith Justice, *Bestseller Index: All Books by Author, on the Lists of Publishers Weekly and the New York Times Through 1990* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1998), 278; "Video Debate," *Time*, 25 February 1952, 72; "Bishop Sheen Preacher Absorbing Sermons in 'Life Is Worth Living' Series," *New York Times*, 27 February 1952; Howard Cohn, "Bishop Sheen Answers His Fan Mail," *Collier's*, 24 January 1953, 22; *New York Times*, 22 April 1955; Fulton J. Sheen, *Peace of Soul* (New York: McGraw-Hill Company, 1949); Everett C. Parker, David Barry, and Dallas Smythe, *The Television-Radio Audience and Religion* (New York: Harper, 1955), 211-13, 315; "Bishop Sheen Feels Everyone Important," *Boston Post*, 19 May 1953. See Blanshard, *American Freedom and Catholic Power*.
24. Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia, and the Cold War, 1945-2006*, 10th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2008), 118, 143; Stephen E. Ambrose, *Eisenhower, Vol. 2, The President* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 162-68, quote on 167.

While observing the powerful lessons of television's outreach, Sheen chose to disregard McCarthy as he had Coughlin. Sheen probably realized that open involvement in political movements and support from McCarthy could hamper his own attempt to forge a broad-based cultural consensus about the danger of communism. By not endorsing politicians or political parties, Sheen avoided accusations of harboring political ambitions. Rather, he argued that his crusade was in Western civilization's best interest. Even so, Sheen's disdain for McCarthy contrasted with the attitudes of other members of the Catholic hierarchy who supported the maverick senator, including Sheen's immediate superior and equally ardent anti-communist, New York's Cardinal Francis Spellman.<sup>25</sup> In later years, the cardinal and bishop would maintain a personal rivalry that may well have ended Sheen's television career.

Though reaching unprecedented audiences through his television show in the 1950s, Sheen was not the only prominent religious figure whose national popularity rested on what today is known as mass-marketing techniques. Billy Graham, Norman Vincent Peale, and Reinhold Niebuhr also catered to and effectively attracted a mass following during the formative years of the Cold War culture.

Billy Graham rose to national prominence in the late 1940s, when his revivals, which often included "all-American" themes and anti-communist rhetoric, attracted large local crowds and national media attention. Although he had been preaching since the late 1930s, Graham's 1949 Los Angeles campaign launched him into national focus after publisher William Randolph Hearst told his newspaper to "Puff Graham."<sup>26</sup> Hearst elevated Graham because he sympathized with the evangelist's patriotic rhetoric. Graham preached: "Do you know that Fifth Columnists called Communists are . . . rampant . . . ? We need revival."<sup>27</sup> Later, the popular preacher pointedly stated: "My own theory about Communism is that it is master-minded by Satan." Reflecting the superheated patriotism and cultural conformity of the era, Graham added, "If you would become a loyal American,

25. Donald F. Crosby, *God, Church and Flag: Senator Joseph R. McCarthy and the Catholic Church, 1950–1957* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1978), 15, 16; Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 97; John Cooney, *The American Pope: The Life and Times of Francis Cardinal Spellman* (New York: Times Books, 1984), 146–68, 218 (often criticized for its inaccuracies); see Sheen quotation on this subject in Mary Jane Yablonsky, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Television Speeches of Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen on Communism, 1952–1956" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 1974), 57–58.

26. Marshall Frady, *Billy Graham: A Parable of American Righteousness* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1979), 201.

27. Cited in William McLoughlin, *Billy Graham: Revivalists in a Secular Age* (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1960), 47–48.

then become a loyal Christian.”<sup>28</sup> Unlike Sheen, however, Graham indirectly praised Senator Joseph McCarthy for his efforts to expose communists in the government. Graham told his listeners that the havoc communism had wrought was the judgment of God on an atheistic world. To forestall that judgment, Americans must repudiate totalitarianism and embrace religion. Graham’s frequent anti-communist sermons reached hundreds of thousands of Americans during his crusades, and, in the process, reinforced American fears of the East on a religious basis.

Norman Vincent Peale arose as another nationally prominent critic of communism. In 1932, he became pastor of Marble Collegiate Church in New York City, which was associated with the Dutch Reformed Church of America. Best known for *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952), Peale promoted what he called “practical Christianity.” Like Sheen, Peale was one of the era’s “God’s salesmen,” but unlike Sheen, Peale had an interest in politics and throughout his life belonged to conservative political organizations, including the Committee for Constitutional Government, an organization opposed to Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. After World War II, Peale joined Spiritual Mobilization as it fought “pagan stateism,” or communism. Peale highlighted his anti-communism in *Guideposts*, a magazine that he originated in 1945. In the early days of the Cold War, *Guideposts* took a strong stand against communism. Initially, the majority of *Guideposts*’ circulation came from businessmen hoping to discourage left-leaning unionism among their workers. Peale also spread his anti-communist message in personal appearances and broadcasts well into the 1950s, but he withheld his support from conservative political organizations, which he felt hindered his popular appeal.<sup>29</sup>

Reinhold Niebuhr was yet another prominent theologian of the period to rail against communism. He was ordained a minister of the Evangelical Synod of Northern America in 1915. After initially supporting socialism in the 1920s, he joined the faculty of the Union Theological Seminary in New York City, serving as a professor of applied theology from 1930 until his retirement in 1960. At Union Seminary, Niebuhr was best known for his “Christian Realism,” recognizing the sinfulness of man while emphasizing the need for Christian militancy to secure world peace. During the Cold War, he supported American policy toward the Soviet Union. Niebuhr’s *The Irony of American History* justified American anti-

28. Ibid. 47–48, 85, 111; Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 79, quoted on 83.

29. Carol V. R. George, *God’s Salesman: Norman Vincent Peale and the Power of Positive Thinking* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 112–14, 161, 170.

communist policies while it also warned that the United States should be aware of its own sanctimonious attitude. While less fanatical in his condemnations of communism than his contemporary religious trendsetters, Niebuhr's wide appeal added testimony to the multi-faceted appeal of religion itself in the tumultuous decade of the 1950s.<sup>30</sup>

The immensely popular Graham, Peale, and Niebuhr, thus, all used the Bible as a sort of manual on patriotism and anti-communism in attempts to forge a vital religious-based justification for U.S. diplomacy. But it was Sheen who almost singlehandedly moved religion out of the Sunday schools and amphitheaters into the living rooms of millions of Americans.

In this light, Bishop Sheen set the path for later generations of electronic evangelists like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell in that Sheen foresaw the potential to reach far more people by his televised appearances than he could have in local venues. Sheen also broke ground on the recurring televangelist charge that God was on the side of the United States in its stand against the threat of global atheism. However, unlike Robertson and Falwell, Sheen supported his prime-time show with conventional advertising; he never used his show to raise funds or launch political movements, such as Robertson's 1988 bid for the presidency. His show was nonpartisan and much plainer than the flashy and openly right-wing productions put on decades later by Robertson's *700 Club* and Falwell's *Old Time Gospel Hour*, and not just because of the simple staging of 1950s' television. On his TV show, Sheen used a speaking style that reflected everyday events and not expensive props.<sup>31</sup>

Sheen adroitly used this type of televised forum to draw those outside the Catholic faith to his crusade. He downplayed differences with other denominations and offered instead atheistic communism as a common enemy to all faiths and to all Americans. With the United States engaged in the Cold War struggle at the same time that a religious revival and the "Golden Age" of television swept the United States, Sheen's cross-denominational message had a powerful appeal, as evidenced by the thousands of letters he received from writers stating that they

30. Richard Wrightman Fox, "The Living of Christian Realism," in *Reinhold Niebuhr and the Issues of Our Time*, ed. Richard Harries (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1986), 10; Niebuhr was impressed by Franklin Roosevelt's success in reforming the worst excesses of capitalism with his New Deal programs. See Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Scribner, 1952).

31. Jeffrey Hadden and Charles Swann, *Prime Time Preachers* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1981), 83; see Quentin J. Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture: The Business of Popular Religion* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991), especially 11-21, 23-43.

were non-Catholics. Sheen once maintained that in “proportion to the population, the greatest number of letters came from the Jews, the second largest amount [*sic*] from Protestants, and the third from Catholics.”<sup>32</sup>

Fulton Sheen’s call for patriotic unity among the religions came at a pivotal time in the blending of conventional religion, television broadcasting, and the evolving culture of the Cold War. In the early years of the Cold War, Bible distribution more than doubled in the United States as most Americans came to openly identify themselves as either Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish at 66, 26, and 3.5 percent, respectively. According to Will Herberg’s research, all three great religions of the time were regarded as “equi-legitimate expression.” Each one saw the other two religious groups as possessing similar spiritual values, morals, and missions. To identify with one of the three major religions was to identify with American values and patriotism. Ostensibly, this theology for the masses grew as a byproduct of the Fifties Revival, yet underlying the new bonding of the religions was a unifying issue—that America must assume the role of a “moral force for good in the world.” This led Americans to consider the cause of their country in the new bipolar world to be the cause of God.<sup>33</sup> The fact that the Soviet bloc nations were perceived as a strategic threat to the United States’ mission of moralizing the world gave the public legitimate reasons to oppose communism and support new cultural icons like Sheen. Without the new medium of television, it is unlikely that he could have been so successful.

Sheen used television to demonstrate that a ranking member of the clergy could relate to contemporary problems and offer reasoned solutions to them. The title of his program, *Life Is Worth Living*, emphasized his hope that a better life and geopolitical stability could be achieved by a recommitment to Christian morality. The show also allowed Sheen to reach millions of people each week with a broad-based message that downplayed his Catholic doctrine in order to promote

32. Will Herberg, “A Jew Looks at Catholicism,” *The Commonweal*, 22 May 1953, 174. For the “Golden Age” of television, see William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), and Max Wilk, *The Golden Age of Television: Notes from the Survivors* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976). See “Video Debate,” *Time*, 25 February 1952, 72; Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture*, 185, 186; Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 73. Those letters would have been a great aid in understanding Sheen’s anti-communist appeal to other faiths, but, as he had done with so many other materials presumably destined for the Sheen Archives, the Bishop failed to preserve these materials. On the issue of the Sheen Archives, see Reeves, *America’s Bishop*, 344–47, 363–71.

33. See J. Fred MacDonald, *Television and the Red Menace: The Video Road to Vietnam* (New York: Praeger, 1935), 128. These figures from the 1950s come from Herberg, *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, 2, 211, 258, 264.

an anti-communist alliance with Protestant and Jewish viewers.<sup>34</sup> Often combining theology and ideology into consistent themes—such program themes as “Communism and Russia,” “The Role of Communism and the Role of America,” and “Science, Relativity, and the Atomic Bomb”—Sheen’s recurring “lectures” on the Bible and flag resonated with the American public.

Sheen originally met opposition to the idea of a religious show in what is now called prime time. The young networks NBC and CBS declined to broadcast the show in the belief that a dogmatic priest would not attract a viable audience. Eventually, the Du Mont Network agreed to air Sheen as a public service. Du Mont did not, however, have much confidence in the success of Sheen’s show, as it situated him in the “obituary spot” opposite Milton Berle’s popular *Texaco Star Theater* on NBC. Sheen biographers have stated that Du Mont quickly received ten thousand letters a week praising the bishop. The program drew an audience of ten million viewers by the end of the first season, actually earning ratings higher than Berle’s show.

As Thomas C. Reeves has noted in a reasoned study of Fulton Sheen’s works, *Life Is Worth Living* at one point reached 5.5 million families weekly.<sup>35</sup> Reeves concluded that this was a “golden age for American Churches”; it was certainly a golden age for Fulton Sheen as well. While Berle had to capture his audience through his antics, Sheen cultivated an audience already primed for religion and patriotism. In this time of such overwhelming religiosity, it is not difficult to envision that theology would intrude into Americans’ popular culture and ideology.

34. See Don Franks, *Entertainment Awards: A Music, Cinema, Theatre, and Broadcasting Guide, 1928 through 2003* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co., 2005), 379; Fulton J. Sheen, *Life Is Worth Living* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1953), 19–28, 127–35, 263–71. Later discussions on communism and related topics are found in Sheen’s *Life Is Worth Living, Second Series* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999 [1955]), *Life Is Worth Living, Fourth Series* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1956), and *Life Is Worth Living, Fifth Series* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1957); on Sheen’s proposed “alliance among Jews, Protestants and Catholics,” see Sheen, *Communism and the Conscience of the West*, 46; Yablonski, “A Rhetorical Analysis of Selected Television Speeches,” 35, 36.

35. See “Video Debut,” 72; John J. Keating, “Bishop Sheen: Purple Passage to the Church,” *Catholic World*, April 1954, 6, 7; Noonan, *The Passion of Fulton Sheen*, 55; D. P. Noonan, *Missionary With Mike: The Bishop Sheen Story* (New York: Pageant Press, 1968), 78, 79; James C. G. Conniff, *The Bishop Sheen Story* (Greenwich, Conn.: Fawcett Publications, 1953), 11. The ten million viewers figure is substantiated in “Bishop Sheen Feels Everyone Important,” *Boston Post*, 19 May 1953; Conniff, “Bishop Sheen’s TV Show,” 8–11; Reeves, *America’s Bishop*, 1–2, 229; Mary Ann Watson, “And They Said ‘Uncle Fultie’ Didn’t Have a Prayer,” *Television Quarterly* 26 (1993): 18; Massa, *Catholics and American Culture*, 82–101. Berle claimed that Sheen adopted the on-air “Uncle” persona to mimic Berle’s popular use of it, Milton Berle with Haskel Frankel, *Milton Berle: An Autobiography* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1974), 285.

Within weeks of the initial broadcast, Sheen's ratings in New York increased tenfold. Eager to build on its windfall, Du Mont added thirteen more stations to the original New York, Washington, and Chicago venues. Even more surprising, Sheen won Outstanding Television Personality at the 1952 Emmy awards, beating out such notable television personalities as Edward R. Murrow, Arthur Godfrey, and Jimmy Durante. When Sheen accepted the award, he followed the example of other celebrities who often thanked their writers, "I want to thank my writers, too—Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John." Sheen's on-air rival, Milton Berle, remarked that it was no surprise that Sheen won, "Look at his sponsor."<sup>36</sup>

Sheen continued to receive awards for his broadcasts, as well as his crusade against communism. The *New York Times* noted that the program appealed to viewers of all faiths and termed it "a remarkably absorbing half hour of television, successfully refuting many of the preconceived notions of what constitutes model programming. . . ."<sup>37</sup> *Look* magazine bestowed three consecutive awards on Sheen for his impact on the media's mass market. The Advertising Club of New York celebrated Sheen as "Our Television Man of the Year," citing Sheen for epitomizing the spiritual value of the American way of life and for being "an implacable foe of communism." In a similar vein, Vice President Richard M. Nixon, one of Washington's most strident anti-communists, presented Sheen with an award from the Freedom Foundation. President Dwight D. Eisenhower joined the chorus by sending a personal note of greeting to the television priest.<sup>38</sup>

After the success of Sheen's first season without a sponsor, the Admiral Corporation underwrote his telecast. Admiral, a major producer of television sets and home appliances, hoped that its support for Sheen would result in strengthening its "all-American" reputation and thereby spur sales. It agreed to pay one million dollars to sponsor twenty-six weeks of Sheen's program. The sponsor's advertising would be minimal on the coast-to-coast broadcasts, and Sheen's salary would go primarily to the *Society for the Propagation of the Faith*, which Sheen

36. Larry Newman, "Bishop Sheen and the TV Camera," *Catholic Digest*, May 1952, 116; Noonan, *Missionary With A Mike*, 79. Sheen was imitating other celebrities who thanked their writers by ascribing his success to the writers of the four Gospels in the Bible. Bill Adler, ed., *The Wit and Wisdom of Bishop Fulton J. Sheen* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1968), 130; Noonan, *Passion of Fulton Sheen*, 60; Conniff, *The Bishop Sheen Story*, 11.

37. "Bishop Fulton J. Sheen Preaches Absorbing Sermons in 'Life Is Worth Living' Series," *New York Times*, 22 February 1952.

38. Lynch, *Selling Catholicism*, 7; "800 Will Receive Freedom Awards," *New York Times*, 22 February 1953; "Plaque for Bishop Sheen," *New York Times*, 30 April 1953; Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 67, 68; Louis Galambos and Duan van Ee, eds., *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, The Presidency: The Middle Way*, vol. 15 (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1996), 1352–53.

directed.<sup>39</sup> In the summer of 1953, Admiral announced that the number of stations carrying Sheen's program would increase from 75 to 137. The show later transferred to ABC when the smaller Du Mont Network folded. By contemporary accounts, the show reached thirty million viewers weekly, generating thousands of letters per day to Sheen's office. So influential was Bishop Sheen's television show that a *Catholic Digest* writer proclaimed it "The most influential voice in Christendom next to that of Pius XII. . . ." To date, *Life Is Worth Living* is the only religious program to be regularly aired on a national television network during prime time.<sup>40</sup> In retrospect, Sheen's unprecedented popularity epitomized just how effectively religious beliefs could be used in the mass media markets to invoke, reinforce, and perhaps even influence perceptions of U.S. cultural values and proper foreign relations.

Sheen expanded his televised Cold War rhetoric to include religious-based attacks on communism and the growing fear of atomic war. He often returned to themes that he had covered in his radio broadcasts, including the philosophy of communism and Karl Marx, and how those ideas had now come to override a millennium of Christianity in Russia. He argued that in the American Constitution, the source of individual rights is God, while in the Soviet Constitution, the source of individual rights is the Godless state. If rights come from the state as in the USSR, then the state could abrogate them; but if the rights come from God, no one could deny them. Sheen asserted that the Soviet Constitution addressed only individual rights and denied all other rights not mentioned.<sup>41</sup>

In a sermon titled "God and Country" Sheen responded to critics of these views who argued that he and the Church, in their zealous Red bashing, were compromising First Amendment freedoms.<sup>42</sup> Sheen suggested that if he promoted the idea of church and state unity, or argued for suppression of speech for those who

39. "Admiral Sponsor of Sheen TV Talks," *New York Times*, 22 October 1952; Conniff, "Bishop Sheen's TV Show," 8.

40. "Wider TV Coverage for Sheen," *New York Times*, 21 July 1953; Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 66, 359 (Sheen stated in his autobiography that he received about 15,000–25,000 letters a day in regard to his television show, but that number cannot be substantiated); see 361 for background on *The Society for the Propagation of The Faith*; James C. G. Conniff, "Bishop Sheen's TV Show," *The Catholic Digest*, November 1953, 6; Schultze, *Televangelism and American Culture*, 185.

41. Sheen, "Science, Relativity and the Atomic Bomb," *Life is Worth Living*, 19–28; Sheen, *Life is Worth Living*, 211–20, 263–71; see Sheen, "Communism," *The Electronic Christian: 105 Readings From Fulton J. Sheen* (New York: Macmillan, 1979), 188–94.

42. "U.S. State Church Opposed by Sheen," *New York Times*, 17 May 1952; see Sheen, *Life Is Worth Living*, 217.

disagreed with him, he would be viewed as an advocate for religious totalitarianism rather than Godly accountability. Sheen often acknowledged that the Catholic Church had always taught that civil authority must be respected as coming from God. Even if the U.S. government began to persecute those in the pulpit, God's vicars were still bound to respect that government. Sheen expounded on these key issues in a five-point declaration of "Faith in the United States" in the 1950s:

We believe that religion and morality are indispensable supports of democracy and that religion and patriotism go together.

We believe in the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States.

We believe that the best guarantee against totalitarianism is a deep religious faith among citizens.

We who belong to the faith are determined to make spiritual progress, and we believe spiritual progress is made when one is detached from the world.

We want to keep the United States a leader in the world and we believe that all God-believing people of the United States should unite to keep the country under Providence as the secondary cause for preservation of the liberties of the world.<sup>43</sup>

Sheen's stand on the First Amendment at this time represented a sort of post-McCarthy pragmatism, since in the 1930s, he had argued that communists in this country should be denied the right of free speech. But his five points also emphasized that religion and fealty to God were identifiable with pride and patriotism, a dualism that, as already noted, thoroughly overarched the U.S. culture of the incipient Cold War.

Sheen ultimately attributed the success of his program to his ability to relate to the everyday concerns of his mass audience. In a *New York Times* interview, Sheen claimed he had no concern for ratings. He credited the success of the show as coming from the desire of the American people to be given clear reasons (by then, orthodox reasons) for the daily tensions arising from the new confrontational relationship sweeping the globe after World War II.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, his emphasis on patriotic topics that people experienced on a personal and public level appealed to an audience that could easily understand them. Nevertheless, those common concerns also served as metaphors for his compatible doctrine on the decline of

43. Ibid.

44. "The Bishop Looks at Television," *New York Times*, 6 April 1952.

Western civilization, the growth of Godless communism, and the threat of atomic Armageddon. In the uneasy years of the early Cold War, it was this message that catapulted Sheen into the national limelight, easily exceeding the followings of Graham, Peale, and Niebuhr, and rivaling the popularity of such early television giants as Milton Berle and Arthur Godfrey.

Sheen's conflated view of geopolitical affairs in the mid-1950s reflected a composite of U.S. domestic and foreign policy thinking and actions of the times. In post-World War II anti-communism, national political events turned heavily on issues of religious faith and sanctimonious policy. So strong were the currents of religious pressure on politics that even President Eisenhower openly embraced a new religious commitment and messianic approach to the Red threat. Kenneth Osgood has argued that Eisenhower's penchant for Cold War propaganda and his efforts to urge a religious-based attack on the East from the Oval Office essentially reflected the President's goal of total unity for a total victory over the Godless communists of the East. Whether for personal or political reasons, Eisenhower delivered a prayer-laden inaugural address and punctuated it with the dictum that "This conflict [with communism] strikes directly at the faith of our fathers. . . ." <sup>45</sup>

In response to Eisenhower's ecumenism, Sheen sent a note to the president urging him to punctuate his faith by declaring a national day of prayer. Sheen soon followed the letter with a similar appeal on 5 May 1953 on his TV show, which resulted in the White House receiving fifty thousand messages of support. On 11 May 1953, Eisenhower drafted a letter of thanks to Sheen for his "impressive suggestion." On 4 July, the President declared a National Day of Penance and Prayer. Regardless of the president's and Congress's dubious sincerity in their religious flag waving, their "piety on the Potomac," as Whitfield has found, exemplified the very spirit of the Fifties Revival. Not only had the Cold War tensions come to spur that religious fervor in America, but by mid-decade, that religious fervor itself had come to influence the nation's responses to recurring global tensions. <sup>46</sup>

45. Kenneth Osgood, *Total Cold War: Eisenhower's Secret Propaganda Battle at Home and Abroad* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 2006), especially 7, 213; Dwight David Eisenhower, Inaugural Address, 20 January 1953, *Public Papers of the Presidents: Dwight D. Eisenhower, 1953* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1960), 1–8.

46. Dwight D. Eisenhower to Emmit John Hughes, memorandum, 11 May 1953, in Galambos and van Ee, ed., *The Papers of Dwight David Eisenhower, Volume 14* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 219–21, see notes 2–5; Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 86–91.

Much of the literature has documented how the President actually merged his statements of faith with policy throughout his years in the White House. Under-scoring this were his references to “religious revival,” frequent appearances at prayer sessions, and his sprinkling references to a “Supreme Being,” “religious faith,” and “back to God” in talks to ultrapatriotic groups such as the American Legion, the International Christian Leadership, and the New York Republican State Committee. In one of his major addresses on foreign policy, Eisenhower referred frequently to “moral rightness,” and confirmed his administration’s moral approach to policy matters.<sup>47</sup> Eisenhower later became the first president to undergo baptism in the White House. In an effort to reflect the tenor of the times, Congress projected its own super-religiosity by passing bills requiring the Pledge of Allegiance to include “under God,” and U.S. coins and currency to state “In God We Trust.” Eisenhower supported both measures, as he and Congress moved the nation to a quasi-religious-based democracy in precisely the same years that Bishop Sheen’s messages of faith and anti-communism captured the attention of mass audiences. In Sheen’s programming, the revival of the 1950s took on one of its purest and most effective reflections of and influences on U.S. national imagery and policies.<sup>48</sup>

As the president and Congress vied for the title of spiritual leader of the country, Secretary of State John Foster Dulles stamped his own public piety on foreign policy. So thoroughly did Dulles merge his Christian loyalty with policy that Arthur M. Schlesinger dubbed him “the high priest of the Cold War.” Whereas Sheen had fomented theories and blueprints for an anti-communist foreign policy, Dulles actually applied his own moral principles to statements of policy. As Richard H. Immerman and Seth Jacobs have noted in recent studies, Secretary Dulles steered America toward Sheen’s vision of America

47. Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 90; Remarks Recorded for the American Legion “Back to God” Program, 1 February 1953, Remarks at the Dedictory Prayer Breakfast of the International Christian Leadership, Address at the New York Republican State Committee Dinner, Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York City, 7 May 1953, Message to the National Co-Chairmen, Commission on Religious Organizations, National Conference of Christians and Jews, 9 July 1953, *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower*, 1953, 11, 12, 36, 39, 267–75, quote on 132.

48. See Geoffrey Perret, *Eisenhower* (New York: Random House, 1999), 428–31; Ambrose, *Eisenhower*, vol. II, 38; Merriman Smith, *Meet Mr. Eisenhower* (New York: Harper, 1955), especially chapter 2, “The Religious Man,” 212–22; Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1977), 90; Whitfield, *Culture of the Cold War*, 88; James Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945–1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 329; “The Testimony of a Devout President,” *Life*, 26 December 1955, 12–13.

mounting a titanic struggle between God-fearing democracy and Satan-serving communism.<sup>49</sup>

While Sheen preached a relatively nonsectarian message of thwarting Godless communism, Dulles referenced Christian tenets in his official directives. As Jacobs has pointed out in *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam*, religious influence on foreign policy grew palpably under Eisenhower and Dulles, exemplified by their determination to empower a Catholic head of state in their attempts to stop Ho Chi Minh's spread of communism in Buddhist Indochina. Thus, their elevation of Ngo Dinh Diem to the throne of power in Saigon was an effort to add biblical proportions to a foreign struggle that in future years would prove to be one of America's most troubling military ventures. As it now seems, in the view of American leaders, Diem's Catholicism trumped his authoritarianism. The fusing of religion and foreign policy that Sheen had long advocated on TV was now becoming a reality.<sup>50</sup>

In his later television seasons, Sheen shifted his approach toward emphasizing domestic intrigue once again because of the decline of the Christian faith and the success of Soviet espionage. Like McCarthy, Sheen offered no proof for his assertion, yet stated it as fact. In light of the McCarthy hearings and the ongoing discussions on the anti-communist McCarran Internal Security Act, Sheen's popular appeal both underscored and verified the anti-Soviet consensus of the 1950s. Without the Red hysteria and fear of Soviet espionage and global domination, it is unlikely that Sheen's message would have resonated so profoundly among his fellow Americans. In hindsight, Sheen's message to the masses of the inevitability of a clash between democracy and totalitarianism set the stage for a following generation of Cold War protagonists.

As Sheen solidified his popularity, he selected his highest-profile communist target when Nikita Khrushchev consolidated his power over the Soviet state in the mid-1950s. After Stalin's death, Khrushchev emerged as the new Soviet leader after delivering a speech at the Twentieth Communist Party Congress of 1956. In that notable address, he demythologized Stalin and called for a new Soviet policy of "peaceful coexistence" with the West, since, in the case of a

49. Richard H. Immerman, *John Foster Dulles: Piety, Pragmatism and Power in U.S. Foreign Policy* (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources, Inc., 1999), 15, see 17–34; cited in Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004), 76.

50. See Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man*, chapter two, "'Our System Demands the Supreme Being': America's Third Great Awakening," 60–87; Townsend Hoopes, *The Devil and John Foster Dulles* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1973), xiv.

nuclear war, both sides would lose. Khrushchev attempted to improve relations with Washington by visiting the United States. Sheen claimed that the appearance of Soviet detente merely masked internal problems among the Soviet leadership. The Communist party hierarchy had formed a collective leadership (the Politburo) to prevent its own liquidation. Sheen gave statistics on how many Communist leaders had been killed since 1936 and suggested that the current Soviet outreach to the West arose only from a desire for coexistence among the leadership of the Politburo. He also forecast that this body would not last long and Russia would revert to a one-man dictatorship, which it did until the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev in the mid-1980s.<sup>51</sup>

Despite Sheen's meteoric rise, by the end of 1956, after moving to a new nighttime spot and new competition, Sheen's program at last slipped in the ratings.<sup>52</sup> During the 1956–1957 season, *Life Is Worth Living* ran on Monday nights against the top-rated *I Love Lucy* show. His audience began to decline as *I Love Lucy* skyrocketed to success. Lucille Ball's brand of slapstick comedy required little concentration, while Fulton Sheen's program demanded attention to intense values and complex ideology. Westerns, with their simple formula of good vanquishing evil, also rose to popularity in the late 1950s. The new genre programs such as *Maverick* and *Wagon Train* coincided with Sheen's decline, signaling a shift in mass audience interests away from national issues to decidedly noncerebral entertainment.<sup>53</sup> The audiences' interest in his crusade against communism waned as viewers now looked to popular culture for entertainment and escape rather than seminars on Cold War accountabilities. Bishop Sheen's television program ended in 1957, and so did much of his public impact.

Sheen claimed he alone made the decision to retire "temporarily" from the series in 1957. He needed to devote less time to morality and global intrigue and more time to his duties as Director of the Society of the Propagation of the Faith. He also announced that just as spiritual considerations had motivated his decision to retire, so spiritual matters would determine his return to television if and when

51. Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers: The Glasnost Tapes* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 342–53. For a discussion of the changes from Khrushchev to a one-man dictatorship under Leonid Brezhnev to the rise of Gorbachev, see Fred Coleman, *The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Empire: Forty Years that Shook the World, from Stalin to Yeltsin* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996).

52. Lynch, *Selling Catholicism*, 27; Watson, "And They Said Uncle Fultie Didn't Have a Prayer," 21.

53. Michael McClay, *I Love Lucy: The Complete Picture History of the Most Popular TV Show Ever* (New York: Warner Books, 1995), xi; Vincent Terrace, *Fifty Years of Television: A Guide to Series and Pilots, 1937–1988* (New York: Cornwall Books, 1991), 452, 772.

that occurred.<sup>54</sup> In reality, by the late 1950s the American public had become less focused on the tensions generated by a post-Korea/McCarthyism/Stalinism than it had at the outset of the decade and more focused on domestic prosperity, mass consumerism, suburban lifestyles, civil rights, “peaceful coexistence” between East and West, and the soothing lessons of good overcoming evil as portrayed in TV Westerns. As Sheen departed the 1950s, he retained his anti-communist dogma, but domestic culture and world affairs now ceased to reinforce his religious–political lines in the public eye as they had at the outset of the decade. The momentum for Sheen’s anti-Red crusade had waxed and waned with the shifting priorities and world events that characterized mass cultural phenomena at the outset and end of his decade.

During Sheen’s ensuing years in Rochester, New York, he attempted to improve conditions for the inner-city poor so as to deter them from believing communist workers’ propaganda. His reforms were rooted in crusading against communism and ministering to the needs of “the less fortunate” as outlined by the Second Vatican Council, in which he played a role. In this same period, Sheen shifted his emphasis to a new fear that decolonizing “Third-World” states might embrace “the false promises of the communists” as a solution to poverty if the Church did not act. Indeed, Odd Arne Westad has argued in a recent study that by the 1960s, the United States had somewhat transformed its fear of communist ideology into a new concern that social developments in the Third World would actually prove the most fertile ground for the rise of Marxist regimes. However, in the 1960s decade of somewhat diminishing Cold War bombast, Sheen received a great deal of criticism for his focus on Third World social issues from conservative Catholics, perhaps spurring his surprise resignation in 1969.<sup>55</sup>

Sheen returned to New York City, where he eased into semi-retirement. In the late 1970s, Sheen made fewer and fewer public appearances as his health

54. “Sheen Retires from TV,” *New York Times*, 19 October 1957. Sheen briefly pursued other TV series in the 1960s, but none commanded the national audience and attention of *Life Is Worth Living*. See Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 360.

55. Sheen addressed the Council on the subject of poverty on 24 November 1964. A carbon copy of the address is located in box 35, labeled Vatican II Typescripts in the Sheen Archives. Sheen reprinted a copy of the letter in his autobiography. He stressed in the letter the need for the Church to take a more active role in domestic and global social problems. See Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 179–85, especially 174, 175, and Paul Hoffman, “Bishop Sheen in Rochester,” *Catholic Digest*, December 1967, 19–21; Fulton Sheen, “The Thirtieth Parallel,” box 34 (labeled Typescripts 1960s), Sheen Archives; “Bishop Sheen, 74, Resigns Post in Rochester Diocese,” *New York Times*, 16 October 1969; see Noonan, *Passion of Fulton Sheen*, 160–71; Odd Arne Westad, *The Global Cold War: Third World Interventions and the Making of Our Times* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), especially 396.

failed. Even so, he continued to argue in his endless stream of writings that communism would fall if Russia returned to its Christian roots, and that the West would be the primary benefactor of that event. Near the end of his life, Sheen completed his autobiography, concluding the section titled "Communism" with these words:

The little tabernacle in my private chapel is a replica of a Russian church. Thus do I express my hopes for the ultimate conversion of Russia. Not in war, but in prayer must we trust that the land which was once known as Holy Russia may become again the wellspring whence a pure stream of Christianity may flow.<sup>56</sup>

Sheen died in 1979 without witnessing the collapse of communism. In his nationally covered eulogy of Sheen, delivered at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City, Archbishop Edward T. O'Meara stated, "He was the first to have an ongoing series of religious radio broadcasts, the first churchman to have a regular television program. . . . His pen produced over sixty books." Perhaps referring to Sheen's palpable impact on the cultural consensus, O'Meara added, "always he addressed himself to the thought of the times."<sup>57</sup>

Prior to his death in New York City at the turn of the new century, Cardinal John O'Connor authorized a study of Sheen's life as the first step in a process that might result in the canonization of this famed Cold War protagonist. Sheen himself would probably have disapproved of this movement, because he always maintained that he never labored for personal glory. Certainly, an argument can be made that Sheen's message of anti-communism and his television personality demonstrated both his intellect and self-effacement. Even though Sheen's "Electronic Gospel" (Sheen's term) influenced millions of viewers and possibly numerous high-placed policy makers, he never departed from the argument that the message and not God's messenger was all that counted. Ranking high among Sheen's theological "messages" was a persistent call for American mass culture and patriotic leaders to confront and ultimately destroy the nation's primary Cold War nemesis, Godless communism.

Perhaps it was a sign of the times that Sheen's messages on moral turpitude and the evils of the Red Satan could prove so successful in the consensus milieu of

56. Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 90.

57. "Edward T. O'Meara, "Bishop Fulton Sheen, and God Loves You Forever" (eulogy), in Sheen, *Treasure in Clay*, 352–53; see Kathleen Riley Fields, "'A Life of Mystery and Adventure': Fulton Sheen's Reflections on the Priesthood," *U.S. Catholic Historian* 11 (1993): 63–64.

the 1950s. As *Time* magazine noted, “among the Roman Catholic Church[’s] Princes—and politicians—it was Fulton J. Sheen who could make religion sensible and attractive to the great masses of people.”<sup>58</sup>

Sheen’s approach also helped his Church more closely align with the mainstream by demonstrating that American Catholics had interests similar to those of other religious groups, particularly in regard to conflating the issues of Americanism and religion with the pervasive anti-communism of the era. Sheen’s unprecedented religious–secular command of the mass media consequently both reinforced U.S. policy and promoted a cultural framework for a Cold War consensus that would last for decades beyond his own years.

Ultimately, the development and impact of religious/cultural influences on the U.S. Cold War consensus of the 1950s must be evaluated in conjunction with John Gaddis’s challenge to progressively view the nuances of Cold War historiography “within a broader comparative framework.” The popular messages by religious icons such as Bishop Fulton J. Sheen demand inclusion in this framework. Sheen effectively interlaced religious themes in his broadcasts to attract millions of viewers in his quest to cast communism as the epicenter of moral decay, un-American activities, and the major foreign policy issues of the era. The record indicates that his message not only alarmed Americans about Soviet-style communism, but also contained a popular ecumenical thrust placing Bible-waving on par with the flag-waving mania of the times. While this is not an entirely new story, certainly Bishop Fulton J. Sheen’s influence (yet to be fully gauged) on religion, culture, and foreign policy in the early Cold War years represents at once a microcosm and mosaic of his “religious revivalist” decade.

58. “Monsignor’s Tenth,” *Time*, 11 March 1940, 60–61.

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