



WILLIAM SLOANE COFFIN, JR

A Holy Impatience

Warren Goldstein

2004

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A magnet for controversy, the media, and followers, the Rev. William Sloane Coffin Jr. was the premier voice of northern religious liberalism for more than a quarter-century, and a worthy heir to the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. From his pulpits at Yale University and, later, New York City's Riverside Church, Coffin focused national attention on civil rights, the anti-Vietnam War movement, disarmament, and gay rights. This revealing biography--based on unparalleled access to family papers and candid interviews with Coffin, his colleagues, family, friends, lovers, and wives--tells for the first time the remarkable story of Coffin's life.

An army and CIA veteran before assuming the post of Yale University chaplain at the youthful age of 33, Coffin gained notoriety as a leader of a dangerous civil rights Freedom Ride in 1961, as a defendant in the "Boston Five" trial of draft resisters in 1969, and as the preeminent voice of liberal religious dissent into the 1980s. This book encompasses Coffin's turbulent private life as well as his flamboyant, joyful public career, while dramatically illuminating the larger social movements that consumed his days and defined his times.

"This is an elegantly written biography, a portrait of a complex man negotiating complex times, written by a scholar equal to the task. In many ways this is the best way to see post-World War II America--from the inside out--through the eyes of a flawed

humanitarian and restless searcher."--Ken Burns

"Warren Goldstein has given us a brilliantly insightful, richly detailed portrait of one of America's larger-than-life heroes--a man who, despite terrible blind spots and flaws, managed to breathe passion back into Christianity and high moral purpose into

the political struggles of the sixties."--Barbara Ehrenreich

"Bill Coffin is an American Knight, stranger to fear, the visionary's best companion, a joyfully embattled Christian, his life the richest imaginable. This book is a worthy

and moving introduction to his grand transcendent spirit."--Arthur Miller, playwright and author

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Reviews

"Goldstein's *Coffin* is a flawed and courageous man. Paying careful attention to Coffin's theological development as well as to his politics, Goldstein gives us a rich and vivid portrait of a liberal Christian fully engaged with his tumultuous times. Goldstein tracks Coffin's search for a theology of love strong enough to contest the evils of war and nuclear threat. *William Sloane Coffin, Jr. immediately* establishes itself as one of the great American religious biographies. The book is beautifully researched, elegantly written, and in the end deeply moving and inspiring."--Robert A. Orsi, Warren Professor of American Religious History, Harvard Divinity School

"William Sloan Coffin's contribution to the movement against the war in Vietnam was tremendously important to the movement's sense of legitimacy and its political success, as Warren Goldstein's biography ably demonstrates. An impressive and very needed book."--Maurice Isserman, Hamilton College

"This is an elegantly written biography, a portrait of a complex man negotiating complex times, written by a scholar equal to the task. In many ways this is the best way to see post-World War II America--from the inside out--through the eyes of a flawed humanitarian and restless searcher."--Ken Burns

"A marvelous story, marvelously told. Coffin was a major figure for nearly two decades of American history, and a flamboyant, energetic, and inspirational one at that. It's helpful in understanding much of this history to understand Coffin's role in it."--Ronald Story, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

"In an era when religious faith and religious fundamentalism seem more and more interchangeable, Warren Goldstein's *William Sloane Coffin, Jr. is* a vivid reminder that things don't have to be that way. This admiring but surprisingly candid portrait of William Sloane Coffin, Jr. shows what one determined minister managed to do for the great causes of his time and ours--peace and civil rights."--Geoffrey C. Ward, author of *A First-class Temperament: The Emergence of FDR*

"Warren Goldstein has given us a brilliantly insightful, richly detailed portrait of one of America's larger-than-life heroes--a man who, despite terrible blind-spots and flaws, managed to breathe passion back into Christianity and high moral purpose into the political struggles of the sixties."--Barbara Ehrenreich

"Anyone who heard Coffin preach in his heyday has not forgotten the gravelly charisma of this social-justice prophet. Goldstein brilliantly shows how secular and religious strands of American culture came together in Coffin's biblically-based liberalism. *William Sloane Coffin, Jr. is* gripping biography."--Richard Wightman Fox, author of *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*

"History will record Bill Coffin [or William Sloane] as one of the great hearts, great souls, great men of the western world. Warren Goldstein brilliantly beats history to

the punch."--Norman Lear

"Having traveled, body and soul, with Reverend William Coffin through the years of America's transformation in the period of civil rights and anti-war activism, I find his story to be some of the most profound testimony illuminating the struggles, the triumphs, and the tragedy of contravening forces that left so much of the task to the next generations. Bill's life and advocacy possesses an ironically powerful relationship to the world dilemmas in which we find ourselves today. Bill's advocacies and reflections, filled with inspiration and sometimes furiously passionate grace, may well help to inform and guide us in what promises to be as urgent a future struggle as those that are the subject of this book."--Peter Yarrow, of Peter, Paul, and Mary

"Bill Coffin is an American knight, stranger to fear, the visionary's best companion, a joyfully embattled Christian, his life the richest imaginable. This book is a worthy and moving introduction to his grand transcendent spirit."--Arthur Miller, Playwright and author

"Warren Goldstein presents to us a multi-faceted Coffin--priest, peacemaker, prophet and passionate human being. Thank God his wisdom will be preserved for generations to come. His courageous voice instructs us in the living of our days."--The Rev. Dr. Joan Brown Campbell, Director, Dept. of Religion, Chautauqua Institute

"Such was Coffin's stature, so robust and powerful his ministry, Yale students could be forgiven for assuming he was part of the physical plant. Without him, the very air would have lost its charge. With him, we were forever changed."--Garry Trudeau, creator of *Doonesbury*

"Warren Goldstein has written a remarkably sensitive biography of a controversial, difficult, and admirable man. William Sloane Coffin comes alive in these pages--reminding us that religion is not merely the refuge of the far right, and that the dream of social justice is at the core of the gospel of Christ."--Jackson Lears, author of *Something for Nothing: Luck in America*

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