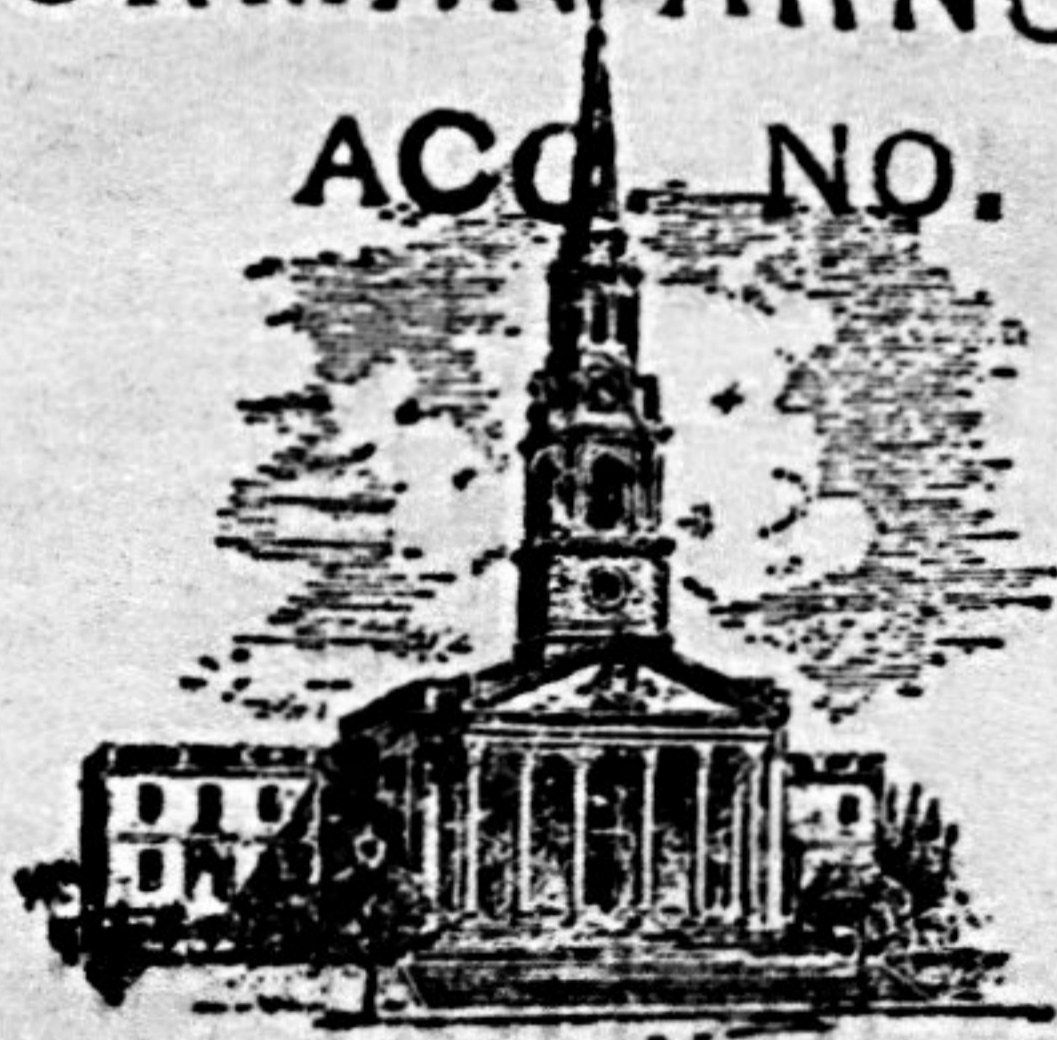


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**WHAT IS AN
UN-AMERICAN?**

A sermon by the
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WHAT IS AN UN-AMERICAN?

A FEW weeks ago, a Committee of the U. S. House of Representatives released a pamphlet entitled, *100 Things You Should Know about Communism and Religion*. It was one of a series of pamphlets, the titles of the others being, *100 Things You Should Know about Communism in the U.S.A.*, *100 Things You Should Know about Communism and Labor*, *100 Things You Should Know about Communism and Education*, *100 Things You Should Know about Communism and Government*.

This made 500 things in all—which is not too many to master if one is a diligent student; and the Committee is certainly to be congratulated upon discovering that the questions and answers fall so naturally into classifications each of which contains precisely 100 items.

Unfortunately, however, the pamphlets have not given universal satisfaction. The one on Communism and Religion, for instance, has caused considerable pain among religious leaders, some of whom have spoken very sharply in condemnation of it. They have also condemned the Committee itself, disapproving of its methods and doubting some of its conclusions.

What is the issue between the churches and this Committee?

By its own account, the Committee is

trying to save the churches from something: indeed, not the churches alone, but the entire nation. And although in the pamphlets this something is limited to communism it is not a prescriptive limitation, since the title of the Committee is quite general and refers to Un-American Activities. The first question to be settled, therefore, is one of definition. What is an Un-American activity? And if a person who engages in such an activity is in some sense an Un-American, what does it mean to be an Un-American?

In trying to find a context for these questions, I found myself wondering how a similar adjective would sound if applied by some other nation. What, for instance, would be an Un-French activity, or an Un-Peruvian activity, or even an Un-Eskimo activity? Would we take it as a matter of course if in Sweden, for example, there were set up a Committee on Un-Swedish Activities? Or (to come nearer home) in Canada, a Committee on Un-Canadian Activities. I found these comparisons revealing: the word *Un-American* quite evidently had a different connotation: and it seemed to be not only a more extended connotation but one different in kind—or at least partly so.

I asked myself what countries *might* have such a committee, and I could not help noticing that a Committee on Un-Nazi Activities would have sounded quite natural

under Hitler; and so would a Committee on Un-Communist Activities be unsurprising in the case of Soviet Russia. And the reason, of course, is not obscure.

The word *Un-American*, like the words *Un-Nazi* or *Un-Communist*, has reference not only to a national territory and the national system located upon it, but to the whole contested territory of ways of life and to the struggle between systems of ideas. Americanism is opposed to Nazism and to Communism not only because the United States as an inhabited country is threatened by these movements but because Americanism is a rival movement.

As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once put it, "Not by aggression, but by the naked fact of existence, the United States is an eternal danger and an unsleeping threat to every government that founds itself upon anything but the will of the governed." In other words, unlike most other countries, the United States by its very nature is a world influence, a world force.

I do not say that the House of Representatives, in appointing the Committee on Un-American Activities, had this significance in view. But I do say that the name would have sounded awkward and impossible unless such a significance, whether understood or not, had been conferred by history. And therefore, it would not have been proposed or allowed.

But here, surely, is the very matter that we must explore. To know what the word *Un-American* means, we must know what the word *American* means, and since it evidently has a meaning indicated by a special history, we must ask what this history is.

Nor can we find another starting-place, so far as I can see. If it be said that an American is simply a person born in America, then clearly, since he cannot be born all over again somewhere else, he can never be anything but an American, no matter what his activities. Nor can his activities, whatever they are, be other than American, for American activities, on this rendering, would be any activities in which a person born in America cared to engage, and such a person, no matter what he did, could not be justly accused of Un-American activities.

Nor, unless we wish to indict the Roman Catholic hierarchy, can we simplify the question by defining Un-American activities as activities controlled by a foreign state. For the Roman Catholic hierarchy is controlled by the Vatican and the Vatican is a foreign state.

It is the same if we think of Un-American activities as friendliness to a foreign revolutionary movement. Thomas Jefferson was friendly to the French Revolutionary movement, at any rate until its excesses shocked him; and yet it is difficult

to think of this as in itself an Un-American activity: or of Jefferson as Un-American.

It is obviously not a matter, then, of any of these simplified approaches. It must be something in the realm of ideas, something that tests behavior by a standard supported *by* ideas, and thus something that has a history.

What is this history? It began with the fact that the nation itself was founded upon a particular inheritance, and took its rise under circumstances likely to encourage the influence of this inheritance. As to this last fact—the extent to which the United States would be in a special position in relation to the rest of the world—it was foreseen even in the earliest days, as, for example, by de Tocqueville, and by Horace Walpole, who wrote from England (in November, 1774, to Sir Horace Mann, in Italy) that the next Augustan age will dawn “on the other side of the Atlantic,” whence visitors would some day come to see the ruin of European cities. Or the poet, Shelley, who wrote in 1818 that America would be

“An epitaph of glory for the tomb
Of murdered Europe.”

But what was the inheritance?—the distinctive national inheritance transmitted through our early history? It came from non-conformist English Protestantism, and from the philosophy of the natural rights

of man as developed by John Locke, and from the supremacy of reason and justice declared by Voltaire, and from the French philosophical movement that followed: so that American democracy, as Irwin Edman has put it, is a "union of the ideas of natural justice and natural rights . . . The notion of justice was classical and French; the concept of liberties was revolutionary and English."

It was the ferment of these ideas that evolved the principles avowed in the Declaration of Independence: the principles of equal liberties and equal natural rights. It was from these ideas, carried into action, that the American Revolution came, and the Constitution, and presently and very importantly, the Bill of Rights. Nor is the further evolution of these ideas to be marked only by such figures as Jefferson, Jackson and Lincoln, highly significant though they are; it was not only "government of the people, by the people, for the people"; it was also Emerson's doctrine of the sacredness of the individual: the doctrine that has sometimes been called 'the citizen as soul'; and it was Whitman's song of the citizen as brother and comrade. And the vision of all of them that America had a mission for the world.

If we suppose—and sometimes it is supposed—that all this is a matter only of what Americanism came to be in the minds of outstanding national leaders, we are far

astray. Not only did the people accept these leaders and come to venerate them, thereby authenticating the Americanism thus exemplified, but, as documented by such writers as Professor Gabriel,* even in the early nineteenth century there was scarcely a July Fourth utterance that did not exalt the American mission "of being a beacon, a God-given beacon, showing to the world what liberty might mean to the whole human race."

It is in this history, then, that we begin to see what the word *American* means. And it is from this that we see how, even from the beginning, the new nation has been a potent world influence, challenging all humanity with the Revolution of the Rights of Man.

If we are to define Un-American activities, therefore, we must define them as everything whatever that hinders the advance of liberty under law, or that betrays the equality of human rights, or that transgresses the freedom of the individual conscience, or profanes the sacredness of human personality. We should have to define as Un-American all impairments of civil rights, all discrimination on account of race or creed. And we should have to identify as Un-American whatever threatened not only the material security but the spiritual

**The Course of American Democratic Thought*, R. Gabriel.

influence of the United States as a nation whose mission to the world is indicated in its founding principles.

And this, of course, if we want to know what Un-Americanism is, is only a beginning. But it has to be confessed, I am afraid, that the House of Representatives Committee on Un-American Activities has not got very far in this direction. Indeed, if one may be forgiven for being candid in so important a matter, a doubt arises at times as to whether the members of this Committee are much imbued with American history. The impression is occasionally almost irresistible that some of them believe that the United States was founded rather recently and more or less in their own constituencies, the founding fathers being perhaps the local chamber of commerce. I recognize, of course, that this cannot be their real belief, and I mention it only because I wish their real belief were clearer. And I wish something were being done about not one but *all* our Un-American activities.

For the truth seems to be that the only Un-American activity with which the Committee is concerned is communism. As to communism being an Un-American activity I wholeheartedly agree. I have always believed so. I am not in the least startled by the information in the Committee's pamphlets or by the sworn statement of William Z. Foster, head of the Communist Party in

the United States, as printed on the back covers—although I think it was well to print this statement. Mr. Foster says quite plainly that the Communist Party in the United States expects to take over the government of the United States, backed by the Red Army. We had suspected as much, of course, but it is good to have his formal confirmation.

But if the Committee is interested *only* in communist activities, why is it not *called* a Committee on Communist Activities? Even in that event, however, the question cannot quite be dismissed as to whether the Committee is composed of the most suitable people. Some of the church leaders believe that the Committee, through its recent methods, is likely on the whole to increase the number of American communists rather than reduce them. Communism, as the Committee's pamphlets so clearly imply, thrives upon resentments. And the Committee has built up a great many resentments. It has also—at least, it is probable—somewhat diminished the nation's effectiveness in fighting communism as it threatens us from abroad. For what else can be the result of accusing scientists—atomic scientists—of unreliability, and building up doubt and accusation, the victims of which are deprived of opportunity to reply, even when the Atomic Energy Commission has cleared them? How, in these circumstances, are the most

able scientists to be persuaded to work for national defense?

Or to turn to the question with which we began, it is certain—so it seems to me—that the Committee is not saving *the churches* from communism. I happen to be a person deeply interested in saving the churches from communism, and my interest goes a long way back. But—and I am sorry to say it—I find nothing in the Committee's 100 Things I Should Know about Communism and Religion that gives me much assistance in saving the churches from communism. And when a member of the Committee, upon being informed that someone accused by the Committee of guilt through association has jumped to his death from his office window, replies that others will be named as they, too, jump through windows, I feel that the Committee's usefulness to churches, if there ever was any, is entirely over. We of the churches do not want to be saved by people who give out names as their victims jump through windows. Furthermore, we remember that Jan Masaryk jumped from a window and that it was *communist* activity that induced him to do it. We do not like this parallel.

Moreover, we find ourselves—or I do, for one—turning to the question I have explored a little, here, this morning: What is an Un-American activity? What is an Un-American? And as we look at this

Committee, we feel at times that we are warm on the scent.

We remember that it was the Inquisition that used to direct that an individual could be seized on the information of anyone whatever, no matter how infamous or criminal; that when brought before his inquisitors, this victim could be tried in secret and denied an advocate to defend him; and that the name of his accuser was not necessarily made known to him. We would call the Inquisition Un-American.

We remember some of our fellow-citizens who have been rather confused about Americanism in the recent past. Mayor Hague of Jersey City, for example, who said to the Chamber of Commerce of that city, on January 12, 1938, the following words: "We hear about constitutional rights, free speech and the free press. Every time I hear those words I say to myself, 'That man is a Red, that man is a Communist.' You never heard a real American talk in that manner." We would call *that* Un-American—incredibly and appallingly Un-American. And we would draw to the attention of the Committee, Mayor Hague's reference to *constitutional rights*.

As to the propriety of mentioning these matters to the Committee, we remember the saying of Thoreau, that "the real lovers of law and order are those who observe the law when the government breaks it." And

Thoreau, who was no literalist, meant not only the technicalities of the law, but the spirit of it.

But then, when it comes to this, it is not only a question of Americanism: it is even a question of moderately dignified behavior. There are times, in reading reports of the procedures of this Committee, when one feels transported into the atmosphere of *Alice in Wonderland*. Of the Trial Scene, for instance, in that admirable and delightful fantasy, when the Queen clears up all the confusion in the court by demanding that the sentence be pronounced first and the verdict brought in afterwards.

There are other times when it seems to be the atmosphere of Gilbert and Sullivan, as, for example, when one reads so frequently in the pamphlets of what the House Committee on Un-American Activities can do for him, and that if he is "ever in doubt," he should "write, wire or telephone the House Committee on Un-American Activities, Room 226, House Office Building, Washington 25, D. C."—and is irresistibly reminded of the lyric in *The Sorcerer*:

"If anything anyone lacks,
He'll find it all ready in stacks,
If he'll only look in
On the resident djinn,
Number 70 Simmery Axe."

Yes . . . from the viewpoint of a churchman, interested in saving the churches from communism, there is definitely some-

thing missing in this Committee. Even when, through an odd circumstance, the Committee does stumble upon some important evidence, the something missing is not made up. One sees only hurrying and scurrying, stratagem and maneuver. One has a feeling of hasty improvisation just before the curtain goes up and the Committee steps forward to take a breathless bow. There is nothing about this Committee that conveys a sense of sure, unhurrying purpose. There is nothing to make one feel that its methods are skillful, or its members delicate enough in sensibilities, discerning, perceptive, sensitive—to anything like the extent necessary to deal with the psychology of communism.

Even the psychology of treason, as Rebecca West has shown, is far from simple. And the aim of such a committee should be to understand it. Because we not only want to prevent communist plots from succeeding; we want to prevent communism itself from spreading. And I think, wherever possible, we want to help former communists to redeem their mistakes and become useful citizens again. I am not sure that a recanted communist who becomes an informer is always the highest type of repentant sinner. I would like to know something of the psychology of those who have been informed against. Where they are guilty, I think they make a great mistake in not promptly confessing it, and

saying as plainly as they can, what motives led them into error. But in any case, I would like to know if they are redeemable—and how? I do not mean by this that actual treason or connivance against the public security can be condoned. Far from it. But I do mean that a genuine study of communism would involve a kind of investigation for which the present Committee appears to be unfitted, both by personal aptitude and knowledge of the background.

A committee composed of people of the necessary capacity could tell churchmen, after a while, quite a lot about why church people, and sometimes ministers, become communists. And it is necessary to know. It is necessary to know the motivation, the moral dilemmas, the confusions—everything that can help us in our struggle to make American ideas prevail against communist ones.

But all this is merely addressed to the question as though the whole business of such a committee lay with communism. I would rather return to the larger possibility—a committee that really did concern itself with Un-American activities; Un-American activities such as I indicated earlier: activities that bring into contempt American justice, American civil rights, American liberties; activities that lessen our influence in the world by betraying our ideals at home. I would like to see an

Un-American Activities Committee that investigated Tract 48—the unspeakable slum to which hundreds of our Negro fellow citizens are condemned—in the capital city itself. Maintaining such a slum, and drawing income from it certainly cannot be called an American activity.

If this, however, is too much to ask, I would at least like to see a committee that could manage its business without damaging the morale of loyal workers for the government; a committee American enough to be at least chivalrous in its treatment of those against whom there is nothing more than rumor or suspicion, and fair enough to give them an honest chance to indicate presumption of their innocence.

Until the Committee can be as American as this, there is nothing it can do to help the churches fight communism except dissolve itself and go out of existence. Then there will be one less embarrassment: one less argument that communists can use against us; one less blot on the American principles the churches are eager to uphold.

And it will be best in any case if the Committee's unhappy career can be terminated. Then, perhaps, another committee, more broadly based than this one and with fewer political axes to grind, can be formed of persons eminent in public life and better equipped to undertake so difficult a task. Perhaps the apprehension of persons conspiring against the peace and security of

the United States can be left to the Department of Justice, which has considerable experience in dealing with such matters. And if so, perhaps the committee appointed would undertake its task with seriousness—and tell us, first of all, what it means to be American. Then we shall understand a great deal better what is meant by Un-American activities.

Meanwhile, in the churches, some of us—some of us at least—while keeping alert—as alert as we can—to communism's infiltrations, will refuse to be merely defensive against it. We shall attack the evils that communism thrives upon. We shall try to carry the faith and purpose of the American people higher. We shall try to give them confidence in their own standards, their own national principles, their own spiritual inheritance, and to deepen their faith that America can be sufficient to its time of trial and hour of opportunity.

Prayer: O God, in whose providence it is given us to live through these days of decision, help us to see the right, and when we have seen it, in calmness and in confidence to do it. Amen.