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CONFORMITY IN AMERICA

The Road to Tolerance

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A concept corresponding to the term "Americanism" does not exist in most other countries. In England one may say that a person or a thing is un-English, and in Sweden the word "un-Swedish" is used in the same way. But the idea of a particular kind of patriotism and a special feeling of unity does not exist or, at any rate, is used only as trimming on festive occasions. "Americanism," on the other hand, is a watchword, a slogan. During the First World War Theodore Roosevelt declared: "There can be no fifty-fifty Americanism in this country. There is room here for only 100 per cent Americanism, only for those who are Americans and nothing else." Statements of this kind abound in American political rhetoric.

This condition is natural. The lack of a common tradition and of ethnic, linguistic, and cultural unity has turned the word "Americanism" into a word of honour. Roosevelt spoke from a realisation that Americans are not a people in the same sense as the English or the Swedes; that there are ethnic groups among the Americans who feel greater kinship with the country they left than with the country to which they moved. It is the lack of a natural community which leads to the emphasis on community; immigration and the resulting national and religious divisions make the word "Americanism" understandable.

Loyalty

Americanism naturally involves strong patriotism. But there is a particular meaning attached to the word which is hardly thought of in England or in Sweden in connection with patriotism because it is so obvious—namely, loyalty. Americanism is unconditional loyalty to America; one must feel oneself an American, not a Jew or a Swede or a Negro or a Roman Catholic. A common definition of Americanism within the American Legion is the following:—

Americanism is unfailing love of the country; loyalty to its institutions and ideals; eagerness to defend it against all enemies; undivided allegiance to the flag and the desire to secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and posterity.

This wording may seem vague and bordering on meaninglessness, but it contains much which reveals America's special problem: the definition is dominated by fear and hatred of a lukewarm or divided loyalty.

From the beginning independent America has been a country of freedom, tolerance, and democracy in comparison to other countries. Immigrants, it was declared, could become good Americans by adhering to these values. What mattered was not where one was born but how one thought. Gradually the collection of ideas thought to be characteristic of America was extended—free enterprise, individualism, the love of competition, the tendency to regard

America as standing outside the clamour of other continents. Typical Americanism automatically became conservative in that it adhered to traditional values which were regarded as "typically American." And this is the contradiction of America which it is essential to recognise if one is to understand American evolution: Americanism means on the one side conformity and on the other freedom and individualism. In certain fields it is not difficult for America to effect a kind of practical compromise: it became, for instance, a social obligation to believe in God, and all religions were permitted (although, as Commager has pointed out, they tended to become more and more alike). In the economic and social spheres a solution of this kind was unthinkable.

What I chiefly wish to emphasise here is that Americanism, through its concentration on common values,

becomes conformity (a substitute for the inherited feeling of community) and that conformity readily becomes a form of extremism because, under the 100 per cent American's definition of patriotism, deviating views are regarded as un-American, and movements containing such views receive the same kind of special animosity which in other countries is reserved for foreigners. In Sweden, when we criticise socialism we say that its consequences are dangerous for democracy, but we do not assert that it is un-Swedish. In America it is said in many quarters that socialism and other radical movements are un-American, a form of treason.

"Opinion Americanism"

This kind of Americanism, which might be called "conformity Americanism" or "opinion Americanism," is the most distinctive form of nationalism in the United States, but it is not the only one. This type depends on doctrine; there are other forms of Americanism which depend on situation or status. One takes the shape of looking upon certain racial or nationality groups as being superior and in the true meaning of the word more American. There are many variations: the white against the black and the yellow, Aryans against non-Aryans, people of "Nordic stock" against South and East Europeans, Anglo-Saxons against all others. Another variant of Americanism consists of mistrust of foreigners in general and asserts the special position of native-born Americans above new arrivals and immigrants. Finally, Americanism has often been equated with Protestantism and has thereby become aggressively anti-Catholic. This form can be considered a blend of opinion Americanism and status Americanism, partly because the Catholic faith has been considered un-American, partly because it has been followed by certain ethnic minorities, partly because allegiance to an international Church has made it possible to characterise the Catholics as belonging to a foreign Power and therefore as of doubtful loyalty. As far as I know, no searching analysis has ever been made of the relations between these forms of Americanism and their importance in American history.

Americanism, and particularly opinion Americanism, puts its imprint on the life of the community in a manner of which the Americans themselves are rarely conscious. People whose national origin or religious faith or immigrant status makes them "second-class Americans" have found it necessary to demonstrate their Americanism, and thus their respectability, by adopting correct views. The investigation of un-American activities has not been limited to Congressional committees or to the last decade or two; it has gone on unceasingly in America and by a very large part of the American people. Intolerance is to some degree the fruit of America's unique situation and has been the basic condition for the forming of an American people.

This has been particularly evident in the demand for conformity in education, which has been the foremost means of welding together religious and ethnic groups. American teachers have been closely watched by citizens and organisations demanding a high degree of patriotism, intervening against anything capable of being interpreted as socialism, atheism, or other deviations from the prevailing pattern. The large-scale investigation ("Are American Teachers Free?" by Professor Beale, published in 1936 under the auspices of the American Historical Association) gives a picture which in all essentials could be applied to the situation to-day.

During crises and wars and periods

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of increased tension Americanism has become more widespread, aggressive, and influential. The infamous Alien and Sedition Laws, adopted in 1798 during the conflict with France, were designed to restrict freedom of speech and of the press, to weaken the position of foreigners living in America, and to make more difficult the acquisition of American citizenship. The Irish were then among the classes of immigrants who were to be controlled or rejected. In the 1840s and 1850s the Native American party and the Know-Nothing movement were directed against foreigners, Catholics, and Negroes at the same time that everything "American" was glorified. In Theodore Roosevelt, who in many respects personified progressive conservatism and nationalism at the turn of the century, opinion Americanism was combined with a belief in the decisive importance of race and in the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon. After the First World War came the "Red Scare" and the new Ku Klux Klan.

There is nothing new in the development since the Second World War. Generally (Texas provides the best example of an exception) opinion Americanism is not associated with any form of status Americanism. On the contrary, the same persons and organisations paying homage to McCarthy and eagerly participating in the witch-hunt declare themselves in favour of tolerance and equality with regard to race, nationality, and religion. But at the same time as anti-Semitism is losing ground anti-

Catholicism is becoming rare and new rights are given to the Negroes. Opinion Americanism has enjoyed some of its greatest triumphs, and the Right-wing tendencies which are its forms of expression have even appeared as a threat against American democracy.

What is the cause of this? May there even be a connection between the advance of conformity and the retreat of intolerance? Here only exceedingly uncertain hypotheses are possible. Because of the laws which came into effect about 1920 the number of immigrants and new arrivals is much smaller than formerly; "the foreigners" are no longer thought of as a danger. Unlike earlier similar situations, there are no ethnic or religious minorities which can be identified with the enemy—Russia and communism. On the contrary, those who have come from the Eastern countries are among the most aggressive anti-Communists; the same applies to the Roman Catholics. This tends to reduce intolerance by reducing the objects of intolerance. But America feels herself to be in a more threatened situation than ever before—the enemy to be fought is at once a State, a doctrine, and an association within the frontiers of America. Under these circumstances the demand for unity and conformity can be pressed harder and with more hope of success than ever before. The conformity of Americanism is understandably stimulated by the fight against the total conformity of communism.