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American Communists and the Nazi-Soviet Pact

By

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When discussing the history of the United States Communist Party, it is imperative that one understands not only its intimate relationship to the Soviet Union, but also its particular status within that relationship. The destructive political vicissitudes of the American Party were never in response to internal changes in American society itself, but always reflected the strict requirements imposed on them by Moscow. Even in times when the party's tracks were clear and seemingly autonomous, one must search for their Soviet sources. To ignore this crucial fact or to pretend otherwise is to misunderstand and distort the entire history of American Communism and to miss an essential clue regarding its nature.

The consequences of this odd political relationship would evade serious conflict only as long as the American Party remained on the periphery of national life. For a short period in the 1930's, however, the communists were a serious factor in American politics, and many envisioned a permanent role for them in American domestic affairs. This prospect was soon laid to rest in 1939 with the signing of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, and the party once more bowed to the wishes of Moscow by reverting back to the isolated life of a revolutionary sect, in all its impotency and ineffectuality. There arises a fundamental question out of this disastrous shift in policy that historians have time and time again failed to properly address: Why did party members, often intelligent, ambitious, and well-educated people, choose to obey this humiliating mandate from the Soviet government after experiencing real political success for the

first time in their party's history? The purpose of the following essay is to provide an effective answer to this seemingly inexplicable question, while lending insight into why these people decided to become communists in a capitalist land.

At the Comintern international convention in 1929, Josef Stalin presented a resounding speech to the assembly, stating emphatically that the policy of the Communist parties around the world could not under any circumstances be based on the peculiarities of any one nation, but must be uniform throughout the world.¹ Stalin implied further, and the delegates present at the convention clearly understood, that this blanket policy would be set and distributed by the Kremlin, which translated into the personal whims of Stalin himself. The Soviet Union, at this time, was still totally committed to the rigid orthodox view of Leninist Marxism and its advocacy of a world proletarian revolution. This ideology, therefore, became the basis for American party policy as well. American Communists continuously railed against liberals, progressives, and non-communist radicals, labeling them "social fascists" for positioning themselves between the masses and social revolution.² Accordingly, their impact on American politics was near nil.

By 1934, however, the world order was in the midst of dramatic change, and because of these sweeping changes newfound opportunities for achieving legitimacy arose for the American Communists. The rise of fascism, particularly that of Hitler, was proceeding at an alarming rate, and most were convinced that he threatened the world. Thus, the Soviet view of fascism,

that it was merely a symptom of capitalist decay and was positioning itself in desperation as a bulwark against social revolution, was articulated into action at the Seventh Comintern Congress in 1935. It was there that General Secretary Georgi Dimitrov unveiled a new policy to be adopted by all parties throughout the world. Communists everywhere were called upon to abandon "temporarily" their goal of revolutionary conquest of power and join with socialists, trade unionists, and liberals in a broad "people's front."³ Liberals and progressives who had formerly been attacked as social fascists were now desired as allies in creating popular domestic front coalitions to promote democracy and the broadest possible unity against fascism.⁴

The overwhelming success with which the American Communist Party utilized this latest dictate from the Comintern was totally unexpected. It allowed for a much more realistic political strategy tailored to United States interests, thereby allowing the party to emerge with an entirely new and much more appealing image. In a matter of months after Dimitrov's speech at the Comintern Congress, the American Communist Party had, for all intents and purposes, entered the mainstream of American politics.⁵ They successfully infiltrated various trade unions across the country and played key administrative roles in a number of New Deal relief projects.⁶ By 1936, the party became the self-appointed vanguard of the entire Democratic Front organized to support Franklin D. Roosevelt and to crush Adolf Hitler. Party membership rose dramatically to around 100,000 members, approaching the level of strength attained by Eugene

Deb's Socialist Party in the decade before the First World War, which had since then served as the high water mark of American radicalism.⁷

One feature that was particularly illustrative of the Communists' growth in influence and popularity was respectful attention they began to receive in the press. Daily newspapers throughout the northeast regularly printed articles, editorials, and poll listings on communist activity, and American party leader Earl Browder became the first Communist ever to speak before such established bodies as the National Press Club and the New York Herald-Tribune's Annual Forum.⁸ Due primarily to this marked increase in favorable recognition, scores of intellectuals, young people, unemployed workers, and even a few elected officials fell under nominal party sway. To the utter horror of conservatives across the country, it looked as though the Communist Party would enjoy a permanent role in American domestic affairs.

Permanency in the American political scene was one thing that would never be attained, however, regardless of how positive their prospects looked in late 1938. Just when American Party members were finally convinced that political marginality was a thing of the past, a devastating bombshell was cruelly dropped upon them, cancelling out every single gain that they had labored so tirelessly for in one decisive action. On August 23, 1939, Stalin entered into a non-aggression pact with Hitler, and subsequently summoned all communists of the world to halt their popular front activities and adopt once again the ineffectual

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goal of world conquest by social revolution. It was necessary for Stalin to call an end to these popular front coalitions since their primary purpose had been to stop Hitler's advance. In light of recent developments in Europe, it was suddenly much more convenient, as well as lucrative for Stalin to welcome Hitler as a military ally, and he was anxious to prove himself trustworthy. The American party leadership was both stunned and disheartened by this latest order, for they knew that such an abrupt about-face would entail severe political costs. Within two months after the Pact went into effect, however, the American Communist Party did in fact revert back to their older, more militant policies.¹⁰ By October, the various New Deal projects that party members so assiduously dedicated themselves to were operating without them, and the favorable press coverage that the Party had enjoyed, likewise disappeared.¹¹ This unexpected turn toward extremism severed carefully cultivated relationships with liberals and trade unions, and the Party's store of trust and goodwill became totally depleted. No one could escape the conclusion that American Communist domestic policy was hostage to Soviet foreign policy.

Why, one should simply ask, did it have to be this way? After sixteen long years of obscurity, American Communists were finally enjoying their first experience of real power, and for the first time their activity was being rewarded with tangible results of substantial measure. For the Party to simply concede to the whims of Stalin at this point in time was not only politically irrational, but spiritually destructive.

The primary problem with this orthodox world structure for the American Communists, was that the Soviet Union chose to ignore too many uniquely American characteristics, such as America's diverse labor force, its intense liberal traditions, and its dynamic classes. Instead, the Soviets insisted on compressing America's left into rigid social and economic categories that denied recognition or authenticity to everything but class, in effect trivializing the nation's most heartfelt beliefs and commitments. American Communists, the self-proclaimed "voice of the masses," suddenly found themselves once again to be strangers in a strange land. This ridiculously strict adherence to the Soviet line of thought made it impossible to mobilize discontent, which was real and widespread, and returned them to their traditional problem of being a movement without followers. The brief era of the Popular Front proved unequivocally, that if Marxism were to succeed in America, it somehow had to maintain ties with indigenous American values.

The real tragedy in all of this lies in the fact that there were several people during this time, some within the party and some outside it, who did recognize the counter-productivity of blind allegiance to the materialist world view of Moscow and chose to articulate their views publicly. Jay Lovestone, one of the original founders of the American Party and its leader throughout most of the twenties, had argued vehemently against this world view. Lovestone maintained that America was unlike all other nations of the world and stated continuously that although the Comintern might have the right idea concerning

the world at large, this idea was wholly inadequate for
communist activity in the United States.¹² With this platform,
he won the backing of over ninety percent of the party's
convention in 1929, but the Comintern swiftly ousted him,
making it clear that Marxists heretics of any shape or form
would not be tolerated.¹³ Even as late as the early thirties,
the time immediately prior to the Popular Front period, there
were people like George Charney, who, because he wanted to
remain in favor with both the American Party and the Comintern,
suppressed many of his most pressing concerns. At the same time,
however, he realized the impracticality of ignoring American
interests and therefore toned down much of the Soviet political
rhetoric while discussing grievances with the nation's shopworkers.¹⁴
In addition to these two men, there were scores of others who
realized that the Communist Party as a political institution
could stand a reassessment of its policies. Whether public or
private, the party was not without its resident critics.

Much more resonant than critics within the party, were
those who believed in the basic value of Marxism but were not
party members. The great debate of "American Exceptionalism"
was popular among intellectuals during the twenties and thirties,
and out of it grew a number of viable alternatives to the
orthodox view that American Communists would have done well
to utilize. One such alternative was the philosophy of Sidney
Hook. A former student of the pragmatist John Dewey and an
engaged Marxian radical, Hook came to America from Germany
in 1926, continuing his writings on Marxist ideology.¹⁵ Hook's

Toward the Understanding of Karl Marx was the most important work of philosophy that had as yet been produced on the American Left. Hook anchored his critique in the pragmatist claim that science (which Marxism supposedly is) is objectively true,¹⁶ regardless of personal values or society's class character. Authentic Marxism, which blends object and subject, was therefore not a science. More specifically, real science, for Hook, invalidated orthodoxy by proving that favorable economic conditions¹⁷ alone will not necessarily cause a revolution. Other, more subjective factors are needed, such as class consciousness and¹⁸ a people's critical openness to anti-capitalist propaganda. Hook basically believed that Marxism was a realistic method of social action, and he accepted most of Marx's theories because they expressed workers' practical interests. In this view, Marxist Communism directs people to act reflexively in order to satisfy real needs, rather than wait for history's laws to¹⁹ unfold mechanically.

This is a very practical concept, one that American Communists would have done well to employ. In fact, it was the American Party's strict refusal to oppose Stalinism that so frustrated Hook into giving up his writings on Marxist ideology. Following the orthodox establishment's hostile rejection of his Toward the Understanding of Karl Marx, he withdrew into the study of²⁰ Dewey's Pragmatism for the remainder of his life.

Another Marxist intellectual, Paul Mattick, presented a perspective that scorned the very force behind the Russian Revolution of 1917. This view, undoubtedly, could have supplied

the American Communists with a credible means by which they could cast aside the entire Soviet orthodox view. Mattick charged that the Russian Revolution and the subsequent Soviet rise to power was not Socialist at all. Rather than empowering workers, as Marx had intended, they simply abolished the Bourgeoisie²¹ without touching capital as a social relationship. Workers and peasants in this socialist state were, according to Mattick, still exploited. Only the exploiters changed. Workers were still deprived of their self-initiative and were still subjected to the control of a leadership which did not share their living²² and working conditions.

Mattick's alternative brand of Marxism was rooted in the early twentieth century Council Communist movement founded by²³ the Dutchmen Antoine Pannekoek and Herman Gorter. Mattick believed, as these men had, that socialism would originate as spontaneous popular insurrections of angry workers struggled to improve factory conditions, and these insurrections would eventually be institutionalized into self-governing workers' councils that directed production and regulated public policy.²⁴ In this belief, Mattick seemed to be searching for the purist, most authentic brand of socialism, an ideology uncorrupted by the post-revolutionary Lenin and the paranoia-induced mandates of Stalin, a socialism where workers not only retained their role as those who held society together, but literally governed it as well.

The views of Hook and Mattick not only provide other ideological paths which American Communists could have followed,

and followed with probable success, but both serve to highlight Marxism's ideal functions which had long since been cast aside in favor of an oppressive, monolithic world movement. With these other realistic options, it seems all the more unbelievable that the American Party chose complete political disaster in the United States. To be certain, there were a number of party members who, while remaining committed to the basic principles of Leninist Marxism, did favor a slight shift in policy to accommodate specific American interests. Two men in particular, Mike Gold and Joseph Freeman, held this view, but made the fatal mistake of sharing it with the rest of the party in a 1934 article about communist political strategies.²⁵ They soon came under severe reprimand for this breach of conduct, and eventually lost their jobs as co-editors of the New Masses.²⁶

Their lack of impact was due partly to the party's organizational structure, more specifically, the commanding authority of the high party officials. The American Party officials were, and had always been, quite intimate with the Soviet leadership and always had the final say on which ideas were considered acceptable and which ones were not. Among the vast majority of the party membership, however, there existed a strong tension between "professional proletarians" who labored day in and day out to further the communist cause, and the so called "college boys" who philosophized on how the world could be improved but did little to improve it themselves.²⁷ Of course, there were many educated people within the Communist Party, but these people had long ago chosen to discard the

more elitist or bourgeois elements of their former life in favor of Marxist principles. They also worked along side their comrades out on the streets. This deep suspicion of intellectuals helps greatly to explain why few intellectuals joined the party, as well as why the work of intellectuals like and Mattick²⁸ received such little recognition.

Nevertheless, the party membership was not any less intelligent than other segments of society, and when one takes into consideration many of America's obviously unique qualities, these outside views seem to be so much better suited for political success. In an attempt to explain this rather illogical approach to American political activity, a few individuals have presented the supposition that the Communist Party of the United States was hostage to Soviet ideology solely because it was a financial hostage as well. Many people support the explanation that the Soviet government funded the American Communist cause, and there is substantial evidence to indicate that this is in fact true. Eugene Lyons, a journalist for the Associated Press who worked in Moscow through the late twenties and early thirties, is convinced, based on interviews with both Soviet and American Communists, that although the prestige the Soviet Union had as the world's only Marxist nation gave it wide influence with the communists in America, it was "their control of the purse strings that clinched it."²⁸

It is true of course that no political organization can long run without money. The American Communist Party was blessed with thousands of devoted members who volunteered their

services without expecting immediate compensation. Its hordes of functionaries willingly worked long hours for minimal pay. Even so, supporting hundreds of party workers, financing a daily newspaper and several foreign language papers, and running a variety of campaigns did not come cheap by any stretch of the imagination. Compounding the normal vicissitudes of raising money, furthermore, was the fact that the party's²⁹ constituency was hardly wealthy.

Party finances have always been one of the murkier corners of American Communist history. The national organization's³⁰ income in 1931 was \$88,434, and in 1932 it rose to \$97,806. The advent of the Popular Front filled the party treasury with³¹ an average annual income of \$325,000 from 1936 through 1938. These figures, however, understate enormously the party's total income. The Daily Worker was financed separately, and sales and advertisements were far from sufficient to keep it afloat. A special fund drive among Communists and their sympathizers usually reduced the substantial yearly deficit, but the amount received from this activity was never totally adequate. Yet³² the debt was always settled by the end of the fiscal year. The source of the remaining revenue is suspiciously absent³³ from all known financial accounts.

In 1938, an obscure Texas congressman by the name of Martin Dies called for a select House committee to probe³⁴ un-American propaganda activities in the United States. The committee eventually came to focus on communist financing of the labor movement. Although it was discovered that labor

movement funds received by communist organizations were not substantial, they nevertheless uncovered some very interesting figures regarding Communist Party finances.³⁵ Dies Committee accountants who examined subpoenaed bank records testified that between March 1937 and March 1939, William Browder, the party's treasurer, had deposited \$1,302,173 in two checking accounts and a savings account.³⁶ The committee also audited forty-three bank accounts held by the party, its subsidiaries, publishing houses, and auxiliaries. Most went back two to three years, but the account of the Daily Worker was examined back to 1932. The accountants were not questioned too scrupulously on details, but the total deposits in those forty-three accounts added up to \$10,164,730.³⁷ Clearly, the Communist Party was spending large sums of money throughout the 1930's whose source was simply unaccounted for.

It is quite a difficult task to discern the origin of all these unexplained funds. Dues provided a portion of party income, but being quite modest, cannot account for the vast majority of it. Many communists at this time, moreover, were still either unemployed, were housewives, or made less than \$10 a week so they would pay only a few cents a month.³⁸ Years later, several former party members testified that the Comintern supplied large blocs of cash to the financially-strapped American Party throughout the 1920's and most of the thirties.³⁹ In addition, Earl Browder admitted several years after his expulsion from the party that between 1930 and 1935 the Comintern provided about ten percent of the party's funds, a subsidy he managed

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to enlarge after becoming Party General Secretary. There is
also a woman by the name of Hede Massing, a self-confessed
Soviet spy in America, who has stated that between 1930 and
1944 the Soviet government openly subsidized the party through
the Runag News Agency. Secret funds, she alleges, were continually
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funneled into party coffers. In her testimony to the Dies
Committee, Massing recounted meeting a disappointed Browder
who had thought that she was delivering money to him after a
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European trip. She also told of paying large sums of Comintern
money (reportedly in the tens of thousands) to a J. Peters in
return for false passports to be used by her spy network in
trips back and forth from the United States to the Soviet Union. 43

Interestingly, many people affiliated with the Russian
Communist Party have corroborated these various allegations.
Dr. D.H. Dubrowsky, a charter member of the Communist Party
of Russia, has spoken about even more staggering transfers of
money. Dubrowsky held a series of appointments representing
agencies of the Soviet government, principally the Russian Red
Cross, in the United States. Appalled by Stalin's ruthlessness,
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he severed his ties to the Russians in 1935. He has stated
repeatedly that the Soviets raised millions of dollars a year
in America through film concessions, estate and insurance claims,
and other "swindles"- more than enough money, he maintains, to
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finance American Communist activities. He furthermore stresses
that the American Party directly benefited from this largesse
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throughout the twenties and most of the thirties.

As it is plain to see, there is ample documented evidence

and first hand testimony that makes allegations of a Soviet buyout seem quite convincing. This explanation, however, in all its apparent certainty, is simply inadequate. Soviet financial support of the American Communist Party would only serve to explain the subservience of the high party officials who actually received this money and who wanted to ensure its continued flow. It does not, however, shed even a twinkling of light on why most rank and file party members, who remained far detached from the upper echelons of the party hierarchy and therefore never saw any of this money, would continuously endure verbal abuse and beatings on the picket lines and sometimes even jail for a cause such as this. These people were the true idealists, and in trying to discover why such people would put up with these demoralizing Soviet mandates, any answer with Soviet financial control as its main premise carries no validity whatsoever. People this whole-heartedly committed to anything cannot be influenced by money.

The real explanation for these people is broader and much more complex. Ironically, it first became noticeable immediately after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Pact, the very thing that ruined them politically in America. Living through the Great Depression, the true believers in Marxism, and indeed all American Communists, had been exposed to all the negative features of America's social order- the stark contrast between wealth and poverty, the terrible waste of resources, the bewildering paradox of want in the face of plenty, and the glaring ineffectiveness of government. Against this

backdrop, they believed, and more ardently as the years passed, that a dynamic new society was emerging in the Soviet Union, a society that had shaken itself free from the defeats of capitalism-unemployment and class-bound poverty- and needed only time to lift a semi-feudal society to heights of unprecedented affluence for all people.⁴⁷ Marxism seemed an appropriate panacea for all American woes as well. Thus, many began to profess their faith in this ideology, embracing it with tired but open arms.

In this context, Communism is less of a political party and more of a secular religion to its members. The success of political parties in the United States is traditionally measured solely by the number of representatives they have in congress and their corresponding influence on legislation. These standards have been applied to the Communist Party as well. Communism, however is a strange phenomenon of the modern day, where nothing exists that is remotely comparable, and political activity is secondary to the unyielding faith that it demands from its members. This faith that Marxism was the future course for humanity and therefore the correct path to take is the primary factor in explaining people's adherence to the wishes of the Soviet state. One must recognize that to the true idealists, the USSR was a shining example of the application of Marxist ideology, for it was at the time the only nation to have brought about a successful communist revolution.⁴⁸ Naturally, therefore, the American Communists, as did all other Communists around the world, looked to the Soviet Union for guidance.

This Soviet guidance, however, went far beyond that of a political nature. A 1934 poem by American Communist Malvina Reynolds described the Soviet Union as "a heaven brought to Earth in Russia."⁴⁹ The description was not hyperbole, but reflected the mental star around which the world of American Communism turned. Communists around the world saw in Russia a Marxist utopia that was attainable in their country as well, and along with intellectual guidance and financial aid, the Soviet Union provided American Communists with a religious-like support. This intimate link gave American Communists the spiritual strength to believe that they would overcome the capitalist leviathan, and would eventually create heaven itself. Moscow became the Vatican of Communism, issuing writs and decrees demanding world unity and affirming the need for uniformity in goals. Nationalist sentiment of any kind amounted to blasphemy and had no place in Stalin's materialist bible.

The concept of world unity is in fact the cornerstone of orthodox Marxist faith. In his memoirs, Irving Howe discusses this particular concept, calling it "Communism's most vital component."⁵⁰ This brand of faith, as in any other religion, holds a person's values and beliefs together and integrates their purposes. At the same time, it reflects a sense of worthiness of the values that keeps their world from falling apart in the midst of crisis. Thus, people who were intellectually convinced of the virtues and overall righteousness of Communism came to rely more and more on their faith in these beliefs when confronted with obstacles like the Nazi-Soviet Pact.

George Charney, a party member for twenty-five years, tells what Communism meant to him:

At the time I decided to join the party, I, like many, was groping for a new spiritual center, for a new God to replace the Jehovah that failed, for a new absolute, for a new faith. It proved to be as enthralling as any in the past; more so, since faith and science, deemed incompatible by the traditional church, were now inextricably fused together in the Marxist world-view. Thus, it was not long after I joined the party that I came to accept each doctrine as an article of faith, never to be questioned. 51

Charney's words not only reveal the power and overwhelming spirituality felt by people who were connected to the communist movement, but they also illustrate how Communism could also serve as a substitute for traditional religion. Benjamin Davis, a former party member who served as a New York City Councilman during the thirties, reaffirms this spiritual aspect and emphasizes the perceived power to alter the course of history that many felt they possessed. Both he and Irving Howe speak of a "collective will" of Communists around the world, that in time, would transform humanity into a civilization of eternal peace and harmony. For Communists, this overwhelming sense of possibility and the feeling that history was on their side was much stronger than the disappointment wrought by mere national or regional setbacks. The general attitude toward the signing of the agreement between Stalin and Hitler was best summed up by communist labor organizer Bill Bailey in his statement:

One day we may live in a world where there is no such thing as a bomb or a gun, and it may be a criminal offense to let someone go hungry. That's the type of world we want. We got to keep going. To give up now would be the worst type of cowardice I can think of. 54

Charney put it more succinctly: "Our faith held."⁵⁵

To be certain, given the sequence of events that followed the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the extent to which American Communists had to rely on faith rather than critical thinking in order to remain loyal reached new heights.⁵⁶ People did leave the party, but by and large, these individuals had never been among the party's most ardent supporters, and it must be said that the party membership rolls had always exhibited a moderate turnover rate.⁵⁷ This segment was largely composed of drifters, people who had not paid dues in over a year (the usual deadline set by the party leadership), or people who had found employment since joining the party and therefore no longer needed the material support that the party provided.⁵⁸ None of these people can be called "faithful Marxists."

Many who left the party, moreover, were victims of expulsion. Following every policy change, the Soviet government gave the American Party little choice in cleansing itself of those who had been a little too zealous about the previous party line, especially if this enthusiastic approach transformed them into high-profile figures within the party. Always quite thorough in his purges, Stalin would be indirectly involved in removing as much as ten percent of the party from the membership rolls following a radical shift in policy.⁵⁹ Former presidential candidate William Z. Foster was met with this fate, as was Earl Browder in 1946.⁶⁰

The vast majority of the rank and file remained far removed from all of this. They had embraced the ideology

but would never rise to the top of the party ranks. For the most part, they were simply ordinary people, but they were people with a stronger sense of purpose and a feeling that time was on their side. Communism's true believers, like those of any other religion, understood that one does not branch off into a heretical sect when faced with an unattractive or seemingly contradictory order from above. They took refuge in their faith and adapted in order to conform to what was expected of them. Malvina Reynolds maintains, as do many other former communists, that no one who did not experience the movement can understand what it meant.⁶¹ To these people, communism of any kind was better than capitalism, and was worth any sacrifice.

There have been many harsh critics of Marxism over the years, who, with the convenience of hindsight, ridicule its principles by stating that thoughtful citizens decide for themselves what to believe and that an impersonal social theory such as this is totally useless. The real point not to be forgotten, however, is that the party idealists, who were also citizens of the United States, did decide for themselves what to believe. Their chief problem was that they chose to follow the belief system of a foreign state in the one nation least likely ever to experience a proletarian revolution. Theirs is a recurring theme familiar to many, one of the self-righteous sectarian who confuses his faith with his church and the church with the priesthood.

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