
Persecution Because of Religious Opinions in Labor Organizations

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In writing this article, while denouncing proscription and persecution on account of religious opinions, generally, we refer more particularly to organizations of railroad employees, and especially to the Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen.

Let us, so far as the United States of America is concerned, begin at the beginning.

The constitution of the United States provides that:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

From the beginning, the great body of the people of the United States put upon record their unqualified abhorrence, their deep and unconquerable detestation, of religious proscription and persecution. In some of the New England colonies the fires of religious persecution were lighted by the men who had fled from such exhibitions of infernalism as soon as their feet touched the sod of the new world, and though centuries have elapsed since these persecutions of Quakers, Baptists, and witches were perpetrated, the lapse of years has not yet sufficed to abolish the “damned spot” from the record.

In ten thousand instances the world has been confronted by the crimes perpetrated by monsters in human shape, but of them all, scanned as they have been by the light of heaven and the fires of hell, there are none which for satanic wickedness approximate the crimes committed in the name of religion.

No imagination, however far reaching, no fancy, however fervid, no vocabulary, however rich in words, no intellect, however towering,

has ever been able to paint the religious bigot, engaged in his nefarious work of persecution, and the contemplation of his deeds of death by torture stands forever as the one bleak and black and horrifying monument of infamy and crime.

Who and what is a bigot? It has been written of him that he is “a wretch, whom no philosophy can harmonize, no charity soften, no religion reclaim, no miracle convert; a monster, who, red with the fires of hell, and bending under the crimes of earth, erects his murderous divinity upon a throne of skulls, and would gladly feed, even with a brother’s blood, the cannibal appetite of his rejected altar.”¹

The bigot is the enemy of man. He has no conception of the spirit of fraternization.

Who and what are the canting crew, who so smooth and so godly, are as venomous as a hooded cobra?

Who, arm’d at once with prayer-books and with whips,
Blood on their hands, and scripture on their lips,
Tyrants by creed, and torturers by text
Make this life hell in honor of the next.²

The question arises, are there any of these morally deformed monstrosities, these unnatural productions in the brotherhoods of railroad employees who are carrying about with them patent hell tinder boxes to light the fires of religious persecution in the ranks of the brotherhoods? Are there members of the brotherhoods who are using the organizations to propagate ideas destructive of the organizations, which if not checked will blast them as certainly as the storm of fire annihilated Sodom, will shake them down as an earthquake ruins cities?

The story is whispered abroad that in certain localities the lodges of the orders are being prostituted to such nefarious purposes.

We are not talking at random. To say that we approach the subject with earnestness, but feebly expresses our abhorrence of the fanatical movement, and if we do not denounce it with the severity its infamy demands it is because of a lack of ability and not of purpose.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen was not organized that its lodges might be degraded as coverts where religious (?) fanatics

¹ The line apparently traces to a July 1832 essay entitled “Religious Freedom,” published in the Unitarian newspaper *The Gospel Anchor*, of Troy, New York.

² From “Intolerance: A Satire” [1808] by Thomas Moore.

might formulate schemes of proscription and persecution, because of any diversity of religious opinions.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen is not an organization of religious fanatics and bigots. It is not an organization which has a purpose of collecting fagots to burn heretics, to erect wheels to break their bones, or obtain thumbscrews to elicit recantations.

The Brotherhood of Locomotive Firemen tolerates, without question, all religious opinions, and the locomotive fireman, a member of the brotherhood, who, by word or deed, introduces creed questions in the lodge, or who uses the order in any way to promote religious dissension, is a deadly enemy of the order and should be forthwith expelled.

The brotherhoods of railroad employees have a right to believe that they can overcome all outward forces; that they can remove every obstacle to progress, and by stately strides achieve anticipated success. They have a right to believe these things, because experience warrants the conviction. But no matter what the past has taught, the day that religious intolerance and proscription is introduced their glory departs and wreck and ruin is their inevitable fate.

To introduce the schemes of fanatics and bigots is to invite decay and death — a multitude of cankers and cancers to eat into the vitals of the orders and sap their life, and to create chaos where order reigned, and fling out the banner of discord in the place of the ensign of peace and prosperity.

We call upon every loyal locomotive fireman, member of our brotherhood, to at once engage in the work of stamping out the abomination of religious intolerance in the order, wherever the deformity shows its presence.

In the future, as in the past, let fraternity, good will, brotherly kindness be the watchwords.

The question of religious conviction must be left between each man and his God for settlement. The brotherhood cannot, ought not, and must not be the arbiter.

We are all “poor wanderers of a stormy day,” and the business of the brotherhood deals only with such affairs as are conducive to smooth sailing on life’s tempestuous seas, and to find those havens of repose to which fraternity in its best and broadest significance contributes.

Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport

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