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# The American Protective Association

## by Eugene V. Debs

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The assumption upon which the APA, alias the American Protective Association, is founded, is that the Roman Catholic religion is fraught with danger to American institutions, hence, the further assumption that all men who believe in the religion taught by the Roman Catholic church are the enemies of American institutions, and therefore, necessarily, are either embryo or fully developed enemies of our American form of government.

We recognize fully the difficulties of the task of banishing errors from the minds of bigots. We do not recall an instance in all history where, by the simple process of reason, argument, and common sense, success has attended such laudable efforts.

Nevertheless, it is true of the past that the influence of bigots has been reduced to the minimum — that their fangs have been extracted, their claws blunted, and the deadly poison secreted in the glands of the heart and soul neutralized to comparative harmlessness.

In the organization of the American Protective Association history repeats itself, but the astounding shame and infamy of the thing appears in its title. To call it "American" is to outrage all truth and decency. It is a blasphemous arraignment of the term "American," which from the foundation of the government has been a standing rebuke of all religious intolerance, expressed in the organic law of the nation as follows:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."<sup>1</sup>

And, as a consequence, no state can make any law *respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof*.

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<sup>1</sup> First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

As a result, the states have, by their constitutions, following the example set by the great charter of *American religious liberty*, provided that “all men shall be secure in their natural right to worship Almighty God according to the dictates of their consciences,”<sup>2</sup> and that “no preference shall be given by law to any creed, religious society, or mode of worship,”<sup>3</sup> and that “no religious test shall be required as a qualification for any office of trust or profit.”<sup>4</sup>

In such provisions we are permitted to contemplate the true glory that clusters around the name “American,” and to make it play any part whatever in the damnable game of religious bigotry and persecution is infamous beyond the power of adequate characterization. It is the acme of devilishness. It is satanic without a redeeming qualification.

The founders of the American government were well advised of the dangers that would confront the people if bigots were left to exercise their infernal malignity towards those who differed with them upon the subject of creeds and worship. They lived in such close proximity to the colonial period of religious persecution that they could hear the necks of its victims snap as they swung off of the scaffold; they could hear the crack of the lash upon the backs of Quakers, when they, at cart tails, were whipped from one town to another until the wilderness was reached, and they were left to perish, the victims of storms and the caressings of wild beasts. They saw colonial-established churches, imitations of European infamies, which banished, in the name of God, one class of worshipers that another class, more powerful, might, with impunity, riot in cruelties which the devil himself, doubtless, regarded as quite unnecessary for the glory of his kingdom, and they determined to establish an American policy which should effectually redeem America from the unspeakable horrors of a reign of bigotry. This, as we have recited, they accomplished when in the organic law of the nation they made America, at once and forever, the asylum of free religion.

In view of such facts of history, who can measure the astounding impudence and infamy of coupling with an organization established in the dark, in secret, for the avowed purpose of religious persecution, the name “American?”

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<sup>2</sup> Constitution of Oregon (1859), Article I, Section 2.

<sup>3</sup> Second constitution of Indiana (1851), Article I, Section 4.

<sup>4</sup> Second constitution of Indiana (1851), Article I, Section 5.

What is the history of this APA? Those who have run it down are convinced that it originated with a gang of schemers whose sole object was to arouse dissensions in the ranks of organized labor. Everything else had been tried. Laboring men, members of organizations, particularly railroad employees, by turns had been cajoled and threatened, but the men stood firm, worked together in harmony, and added to their numbers. Then came the scheme to *bomb* their ranks with dynamite bigotry. The adroitness of the plot cannot be questioned. The fires of hell never burn more fiercely than when fanned by the breath of fanatics.

Regarding the history of the organization, we take the following from *Every Saturday*, published at Albany, New York:

Between two and three years ago a conference was held in a certain office on Wall Street, which was attended by representatives of the Chicago and Rock Island Railway, the New York Central and Hudson River, the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul, and numerous other railway companies, together with representatives from several large rolling mill corporations and iron manufacturers generally, besides many miscellaneous trusts and combines.

The meeting was a strictly secret one and its object at a primarily to reduce the wages of the American workmen.

Numerous meetings of these same conferees were held at different places, the object always being the same. Fellow monopolists and corporation managers were frequently called upon to express their views and experience. These men were invited to come from various parts of Europe and Canada.

It was a gentleman from the latter country, a great railroad magnate, who formulated the idea upon which the committee was to work to bring about the desired result, viz., to reduce the wages of the American toiler.

The story goes that the invited guest from Canada was of the opinion that no way could he devised to lower wages until the powerful labor organizations were overcome; dissensions and dissolution must be forced into their ranks, and with their disruption accomplished it would be a very easy matter to lower the wages.

This very desirable end could be arrived at by in stilling into their ranks a religious prejudice. "You know," said he, "they are nearly all honest, conscientious fellows, with little or no education, and they fear God and live up to their various ways of adoring Him."

He then went on to tell how that they in Canada had a certain class of people who were pleased to be called Orangemen,

and that they had an inherent dislike for Catholics and that the latter fully reciprocated in their hatred for Orangemen. All that was necessary to do in his country was to bring the two together and harmony would immediately give place to pandemonium.

These worse than devils concluded to act upon the Canadian idea. The railroads introduced a society and called it the American Protective Association (APA). Men were hired to boom the organization and do nothing else. Narrow-minded and prejudiced tools joined it, and the fight was on. Iron merchants did their share toward helping it along, and showed a preference for men whom it had succeeded in sucking in.

Here we have the underlying reasons set forth for the existence of such a nondescript organization as the APA. The reasonableness of the statement crops out in every line. The reduction of wages with railroad magnates is the supreme requirement — for every dollar of reduction goes to swell the dividends on watered stock — and if the organizations could be disrupted by the introduction of religious prejudices, or of discord in their ranks, a point would lie gained, all the more certainly, since, once light the fires of religious fanaticism and nothing short of a miracle can quench them. In this connection it is well for all labor organizations to understand the nature of the oath to which a member of the APA is required to subscribe to form any rational conception of the degradation to which he voluntarily submits, an oath which eliminates from its victim not only the nobility of Americanism, but every quality of manhood worthy of recognition, leaving the unfortunate creature with nothing to boast of except the depravity and malignity which in all countries and ages have made bigots the objects of unutterable loathing.

The oath is as follows:

I do most solemnly promise and swear that I will use my influence to promote the interest of all Protestants, everywhere in the world; that I will not employ a Roman Catholic in any capacity if I can procure the service of a protestant; that I will not aid in building, or in maintaining, by any resources, any Roman Catholic church or institution of their sect or creed whatsoever, but will do all in my power to retard and break down the power of the pope; that I will not enter into any controversy with a Roman Catholic upon the subject of this order, nor will I enter into any agreement with a Roman Catholic to strike or create a disturbance, whereby the Roman Catholic employees may undermine and substitute the Protestants; and that in all grievances I will

seek only Protestants and counsel with them, to the exclusion of all Roman Catholics, and will not make known to them anything of any nature matured at such conferences; that I will not countenance the nomination, in any caucus or convention, of a Roman Catholic, for any office in the gift of the American people; and that I will not vote for, nor counsel others to vote for any Roman Catholics; that I will endeavor at all times to place the political positions of this government in the hands of Protestants. (Repeat.) To all of which I do most solemnly promise and swear, so help me God. Amen.

We write to warn organizations of railroad employees against the infamous purposes of the APA. We write to tell them that once introduced into the organization their power to accomplish good for themselves forever vanishes. We write to enthrone everywhere throughout the boundaries of our favored land that true, lofty and sublime Americanism, that regards men's religious convictions as sacred as life itself, and inextricably interwoven with the eternal and irrevocable rights of "Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." Once light the fires of religious fanaticism, and the lodge fire is at once and forever extinguished. The term "Brotherhood" becomes a by-word and fraternity would be everywhere proclaimed as a stupendous sham. Americanism is as opposite of bigotry as water is the opposite of fire, as truth is the opposite of a lie, or as eternal justice is the opposite of those wrongs which reduce men to the condition of slaves.

To read the oath taken by misguided members of the APA embodying, as it does, every ingredient of malevolence that makes unbridled bigotry a horror, and evinces such blind obedience to fanatical venom that civilization becomes savagery and Christianity the synonym of hate. We do not believe that the APA will be permitted, at the behest of the oppressors of labor, to wreck labor organizations, but it is "a pestilence that walketh in darkness,"<sup>5</sup> that it may destroy at noonday, and the only safety is in guarding the lodge from its blighting influences.

*Edited with footnotes by Tim Davenport*

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<sup>5</sup> Reference to *Psalm 91*, verse 6.