Abolition, Fanaticism, and Freedom (1835)

In this excerpt from an editorial in the *New York Evening Post*, the writer stated that although abolition was not a worthy cause and was a form of fanaticism, it was still the duty of everyone to be sure that abolitionists enjoyed their right to make their opinions known. Tocqueville and other observers had noted the difficulty for any individual of standing against the will of the majority in America. Because of the violence and repression that they met in the North and the South, abolitionists moved freedom of speech to the center of their ideal of freedom. As you read this editorial, consider what institutions were capable of protecting those with unpopular opinions.

We defy any man to point to a single instance in which fanaticism has been turned from its object by persecution, or in which its ardour has not been inflamed and its strength increased when opposed by arguments of brute force. On the contrary, history contains many striking cases of fanatical enterprises languishing and being abandoned, when those engaged in them were suffered to take their own course, without any other hinderance than such as was necessary to prevent their overleaping the safeguards of society.

Fanaticism is a species of insanity and requires analogous treatment. In regard to both, the soothing system is proved by its results to be the most effectual. The mind slightly touched with lunacy, may soon be exasperated into frenzy by opposition, or soon restored to perfect sanity by gentle and assuasive means. So, too, the mind, excited to fanaticism on any particular subject, religious, political, or philanthropic, is but heated to more dangerous fervour by violence, when it might easily be reduced to the temperature of health by the lenitives which reason and moderation should apply.

The first great impulse which the abolition cause received in this city was, we are persuaded, the attempt to suppress it by the means of mobs; ...and we do hope that, in view of the pernicious consequences which have flowed from violent measures hitherto, a course more consistent with the meekness of Christianity, and with the sacred rights of free discussion, will be pursued henceforth.

While we believe most fully that the abolitionists are justly chargeable with fanaticism, we consider it worse than folly to misrepresent their character in other respects. They are not knaves nor fools, but men of wealth, education, respectability and intelligence, misguided on a single subject, but actuated by a sincere desire to promote the welfare of their kind. This, it will hardly be denied, is a true description, of at least a large proportion of those termed abolitionists. Is it not apparent on the face of the matter, that invective, denunciations, burnings in effigy, mob violence, and the like proceedings, do not constitute the proper mode of changing the opinions or conduct of such men? The true way is, either to point out their error by temperate arguments, or better still leave them to discover it themselves. The fire, unsupplied with fuel, soon flickers and goes out, which stirred and fed, will rise to a fearful conflagration, and destroy whatever falls within the reach of its fury.
With regard to the outrage lately committed in Charleston, we do not believe it constitutes any exception to our remarks. The effects of all such proceedings must be to increase the zeal of fanaticism, which always rises in proportion to the violence of the opposition it encounters....

Neither the General Post Office, nor the General Government itself, possesses any power to prohibit the transportation by mail of abolition tracts. On the contrary it is the bounden duty of the Government to protect the abolitionists in their constitutional right of free discussion; and opposed, sincerely and zealously as we are, to their doctrines and practise, we should be still more opposed to any infringement of their political or civil rights. If the Government once begins to discriminate as to what is orthodox and what heterodox in opinion, what is safe and what is unsafe in its tendency, farewell, a long farewell to our freedom.

The true course to be pursued, in order to protect the South as far as practicable, and yet not violate the great principle of equal freedom, is to revise the post-office laws, and establish the rates of postage on a more just gradation-on some system more equal in its operation and more consonant with the doctrines of economic science. The pretext under which a large part of the matters sent by mail are now sent free of postage-either positively or comparatively-is wholly unsound. "To encourage the diffusion of knowledge" is a very good object in itself; but Government has no right to extend this encouragement to one at the expense of another. Newspapers, pamphlets, commercial and religious tracts, and all sorts of printed documents, as well as letters, ought to pay postage, and all ought to pay it according to the graduation of some just and equal rule. If such a system were once established, making the postage in all cases payable in advance, with duplicate postage on those letters and papers which should be returned, not only the flood of abolition pamphlets would be stayed, but the circulation of a vast deal of harmful trash at the public expense would be prevented, creating a vacuum which would naturally be filled with matters of a better stamp.