

THE PURITAN INFLUENCE IN EDUCATION

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THE late Victorians used to say that wherever the Turkish foot had trod no grass would grow. They were ignorant of certain facts of agricultural economics, and I trust that my fellow panelists today will not find a similar flaw in my paraphrase when I say that wherever the Puritan foot has trod, schools and colleges have sprung up.

If you will take a map showing the distribution of colleges in the United States, preferably a map twenty or more years old, you will find across it a band of colleges like the band of the Milky Way across the heavens, tracing the westward migration of New Englanders. Their influence is so obvious that some New England enthusiasts have pictured the educational system in the Puritan colonies in glowing terms which could not be truthfully applied to any society in any age. Partly in reaction, the popular historians of a generation ago—men like J. T. Adams, Beard, Parrington, Jernigan, and Wertenbaker—went to the opposite extreme and described Puritan education as a system of denominational tyranny which failed in every respect. The good points in New England education, they said, could only appear when the dead hand of Puritanism was removed. We cannot here go into the fact that they were mistaken as to the nature of Puritanism and as to its demise. Their mistakes, some of which I shall point out later, had their origin in the fact that they started with a thesis and looked for facts to support it.

Twenty years ago some of us who were concerned in one way or another with education in New England set to work to gather source material, so that later writers could build on better foundations. So far as the professional historians are concerned, the

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balance has now been righted, but only the other day one of them who has done great work in this field told me, in chagrin, that his contributions seemed quite unknown to the writers whose training had been primarily in the field of education. The mistakes of this character which appear in books on colonial education arise from the fact that the authors were unaware of the source material and ignorant of the European background.

Puritan education was simply one aspect of the Reformation. The essential quality of Protestantism is the right and duty of the individual to make his own personal interpretations of the Bible and of theology instead of accepting blindly those of the church. Luther's theses were an act of the intellect. Had he based them on divine revelation, setting the vision of one man against that of the age-old Church, he would have been laughed at. If he was to be heard, he had to appeal to the reason which all men share.

For centuries the minds of many simple, uneducated men had been stirring in the doctrinal chains of the church. The telling charge against them had been that they were ignorant. Now that educated men like Luther and Calvin questioned the church, heresy became respectable. Thus the reformers, who had no use for democracy, loosed the force of individual judgment, and became the leaders of a popular and essentially democratic movement. Horrified though they were by the excesses of some of their followers, they had no choice but to rely on the support of men of many divergent opinions.

Historically, the Protestant churches have differed among themselves most significantly according to the degree of individual judgment which they encouraged or tolerated. The Anglican, Lutheran, and Puritan churches have held that we cannot have freedom without order, and without order we cannot have the schools and colleges which are essential to a sound and developing religious and civil life. The radical Protestants, on the other hand, called universities "stews of Anti-Christ," "houses of Lies," that "stink before God with the most loathsome abomination." The land of Roger Williams was the last part of New England to have free public schools, and it sent but one boy to college in the seventeenth century.

The contribution of the Puritans in education and in other fields was made possible by the center position which they occupied in Protestantism. Like the Lutherans and Anglicans they saw the

need of planning and of form, but like the Antinomians they also felt the beating of the wings of the spirit trying to break out of the cage of medievalism.

In the Puritan this urge to plan and form was accompanied by the urge to carry out and to execute, as the Salem witches discovered. Other colonies had both witches and laws against them, but did not feel the same compulsion to keep order. In other colonies men planned colleges, but rarely could they obtain the support necessary to establish them.

The Puritans were the best town planners since the ancient Greeks. The heart of each town consisted of its common, meeting-house, schoolhouse, mill, shops, and homes, a pattern so plain that in driving through New England today one can tell at a glance whether a town dates back to Puritan times. In the same way the Puritans planned and organized their social life, providing carefully for education, religious instruction, poor relief, and the like.

The troublesome question to modern historians has been the goal of the Puritan planning and its value. Writers like Beard and J. T. Adams have maintained that the purpose of the Puritans in founding colleges was to train ministers, that the aim of their schools was not "to make good citizens but to instruct the Christian youth sufficiently that they might search the Scriptures," and that "the newer ideal of an educated citizenry for the benefit of the state" could be realized only after the decline of Puritanism. Because the Puritan goal was in part religious, they decry it, and ignore the way in which religion permeated all aspects of life in the seventeenth century.

At the other extreme, it is possible to go too far and to over-emphasize the secular character of Puritan education at the college level. Although colonial Harvard was not, as some have said, merely a theological seminary, its function of providing an educated stock from which a learned ministry could be drawn was more important to its founders than it would have been to an Anglican or an Antinomian society. In a ritualistic church, learning is not necessary to the clergy, and teaching is not necessary for the congregation. In the Puritan churches they were essential, for their religious services did not consist of worship but of instruction.

Ritualism was no real threat to Puritanism, but Antinomianism was. The establishment of Harvard College was delayed for a year

by the controversy raised by Anne Hutchinson, whose doctrine of Grace proceeding from an inner light would have done away with the need for education in religion. She denounced all of the ministers but two, and one of her followers referred to universities as "Ninneversities."¹ To combat such "spiritual drunkenness," as the Puritans called it, an educated ministry was essential.

The significance of the Puritan experiment in this connection is not that they used education for religious purposes, but that they substituted it for the fagot. The Puritans were no less distressed than the Spanish at the paganism of the Indians, but they used education rather than the Inquisition to combat it. In the years during which John Eliot was translating the Bible into Algonquin and teaching the Indians to read it, more than six thousand Indians were burned at the stake in Peru for worshipping the idols of their fathers.

There is no contemporary evidence whatsoever to support the contention of modern writers that the purpose of the Puritan system of education was to train good sectarians, not good citizens. On the other hand, one might fill books with quotations like this from a sermon which Jeremiah Wise preached to the General Court: "The Education of Youth is a great Benefit and Service to the Publick. This is that which civilizes them, takes down their Temper, tames the Fierceness of their Natures, forms their minds to vertue, learns 'em to carry it with a just Deference to Superiors: makes them tractable or manageable; and by learning and knowing what it is to be under Government, they will know the better how to govern others when it comes their Turn. . . . Yea good Education tends to promote Religion and Reformation as well as Peace and Order."²

Education was one of those ancient functions of the church which the Puritans deliberately lopped off and placed in the hands of the secular state, along with marriage, divorce, and the administration of probate matters. But as the Puritans reduced the field of church activity, they stressed the religious responsibility of the individual in the affairs of everyday life. Perhaps the only doctrine on which all Puritans agreed was that of vocation. By this they meant that it was man's duty to worship God by being the best cowherd, the best shipbuilder, or the best king, that in him lay.

¹ Edward Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence* (1910 ed.), 127-128.

² Jeremiah Wise, *Rulers the Ministers of God* (Boston, 1729), 31.

To them it would be a sin to leave unused any talent which might be brought out by education.³

This concept of the obligation of the educated man to serve the community explains in large degree the importance of the educational system in the eyes of the community. The sum of £400 appropriated by the General Court for the founding of Harvard College was more than half of the entire tax levy for the previous year. In 1644 the New England Confederation asked every family to contribute a shilling or its equivalent in wampum or wheat for the support of the college. The surviving lists of donations testify to the faith of even frontier towns in the system of education. The entire system was the result of a popular do-it-yourself movement which could have been worked up only in an essentially democratic community organized on a town meeting basis. That community was the social expression of Puritanism.

Popular writers who have expressed their own social discontent by attacking a kind of Puritanism which existed only in their own misunderstanding have tried to discount the influence of Harvard College on modern education by belittling its state in its early years. A favorite bit of evidence is afforded by two Dutch gentlemen who visited the college and found that the undergraduates could not understand their Latin. The answer is, of course, that the men used the Continental pronunciation. Not long after their visit, Rowland Cotton left Harvard at the end of his sophomore year and matriculated at the University of Herderwyck, where he took a degree in medicine in three months. The only conclusion to be drawn from this is that Rowland knew Latin. Anyone who takes seriously the charge that the colonial college education was no better than that afforded by the modern secondary schools should examine the manuscript exercises which survive in the University Archives.

The founding of a college within six years of the establishment

³ I have omitted discussion of the education of women because our subject is "higher education" and actually no society in the world in the 18th century gave women higher education. In New England the girls received reading and writing instructions with the boys in the public schools. If, like Cotton Mather, one wanted his daughter to learn Latin, he sent her to a private school. I have never encountered a native-born 18th century woman who was illiterate. There were no doubt such on the frontier, for the literacy level is directly connected with the size of one's community. The amazing number of colonial books with women's signatures on the fly leaves show that they were great readers.

of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay is an expression of the spirit of the Puritan community without rival in the history of colonization. Directly, and through her daughter, Yale, and her granddaughter, Princeton, Harvard College has transmitted to our modern educational system several distinctively Puritanical attitudes.

The medieval gentleman scorned university education as something fit for poor boys only, and the parietal rules of early Oxford and Cambridge were a bar against gentlemen's sons. The Puritan ideal of vocation, by contrast, sent gentlemen to college in order that they might better fit themselves to serve the community. The resulting mixture of rich and poor was largely responsible for the democratic spirit which is still one of the great contrasts between the American and the European educational systems. In Harvard and Yale the sons of the wealthy, or older, families found themselves ranked below some of the sons of the poorer and newer families. According to the Puritan way of thought, education obliterated social lines. A blacksmith's son who had worked his way through college and became a country minister would expect, when he visited Boston on election day, to dine with a Governor or a Chief Justice whom he had known as an undergraduate. And when a Hutchinson or an Oliver, who had several generations of wealth and of holding high offices behind him, passed through the town in which the blacksmith's son was the minister, he would naturally stop and have dinner with him.

Although the rise of Puritanism meant that the percentage of gentleman's sons in the colleges was much higher than ever before, it did not mean any neglect of the campaign to recruit promising poor boys. So successful was the effort to keep down the cost of a college education by public contributions and the like, that a New England farmer could put a boy through college at the cost of about four hogs a year. The result was that a larger percentage of the New England population was in college in 1650 than there is today.

This idea that the Puritan colleges were an influence for democracy will remind some of you that one of the popular histories of American education to prove the contrary devoted several pages to the system of academic seniority. In pre-Revolutionary Harvard and Yale, the members of each freshman class were placed in an order of seniority in which the boys recited, were served at the

table, and marched in all academic processions. They maintained this order as long as they lived; they remain in it in the modern editions of the catalogue, and presumably in Heavenly reunions.

This order, which eighteenth-century men called that of "dignity of family," has been presumed to indicate a kind of Blue Book social stratification. It was, in fact, something quite different at Harvard—I do not presume to speak for Yale.

Down to about 1725 the order of academic seniority reflected academic promise. This Nathaniel Cotton of the Class of 1717 was warned by his brother that if he did not do well in the entrance examination, he would be placed very low in his class because there were many good scholars entering. About 1725 it occurred to someone at Harvard to place the boys in the same order that their fathers would have in public processions. By this system, the sons of governors came first, followed by the sons of lieutenant-governors, the sons of members of the upper house of the legislatures in the order of the fathers' appointments, the sons of justices of the peace in the order of the dates of their fathers' commissions, followed by the sons of college graduates in roughly the order of their dates of graduation. This system took care of a third or a half of each class. For the other students the old system of academic promise seems to have applied; at least, there is no other way of explaining why bright young charity students ranked as high as they did.

"Dignity of family," then, meant the dignity acquired by holding public office in a day when that was a matter of duty to the community. Note that one result of the system was that the sons of the clergy usually followed the sons of the magistrates, just as in Puritan society the clergy always took their place between the magistrates and ordinary folk. This system was neither aristocratic nor democratic in the modern sense of levelling. It rewarded public service by public honors.

Some of the readers of Samuel Eliot Morison's volumes on early Harvard have come away with the idea that by "humanistic education" and "a gentleman's education" he meant a kind of schooling which would place the colonial graduate in an ivory tower from which he would look down his nose at common folk who could not read Latin or Greek. Had this been true, the Puritan colleges would indeed have had little influence on modern America. However, Mr. Morison was using the terms "humanistic education," "a

gentleman's education," and "liberal education" in the Puritan sense of that kind of education which best enabled a man to play his part in a free and democratic community. This prepared neither for cloistered scholarship nor for the professional practice of law, medicine, or the ministry.

The medieval universities were strictly professional in that they prepared only for careers in the church. After the Reformation they were flooded with the sons of the new gentry, based chiefly on mercantile wealth, who were seeking a truly liberal education. Because Oxford and Cambridge failed to provide it, Sir Humphrey Gilbert proposed a university of London which would have given a thoroughly practical education, providing, among other things, an old soldier to teach foot drill and the use of arms, a model ship and instruments with which the mathematics professor could teach navigation and naval architecture, and a physician to teach first aid and surgery, both of which were then regarded as being outside the field of academic medicine. Here one sees the roots of the R.O.T.C., orientation courses, and "General Education."

The Puritans never did found their University of London, but their American colleges provided just this kind of general education. President Clap of Yale, recognizing that a majority of his students were "designed for . . . publick and important Stations in Civil Life" regularly lectured on "the Nature of civil Government, the civil Constitution of Great-Britain, the various kinds of Courts, the Officers superior and inferior, the several kinds of Laws by which the Kingdom is governed; as the Statute, Common, Civil, Canon, Military and Maritime Laws; together with their several various Origins and Extents; the several Forms of Ecclesiastical Government which have obtained in the Christian Church; ancient History and Chronology, the Nature and Form of Obligatory Writings and Instruments, Agriculture, Commerce, Navigation, with some general Sketches upon Physick, Anatomy, Heraldry and Gunnery."⁴

In a day in which a Harvard College tutor could be called directly from his desk to the supreme court of the province, his students needed just this kind of general education, for they never knew when they were going to be called upon to serve as a justice of the peace or to level a cannon.

⁴ Thomas Clap, *The Annals or History of Yale College* (New Haven, 1766), 84-85.

There has been a school of writers who have maintained that the chief influence of Harvard in Puritan times was to clamp iron bonds of sectarian orthodoxy on the community, choking off all freedom of thought. These ideas come from a lack of knowledge of the background. By order of James I, every candidate for a degree in an English university had to subscribe to the Three Articles, one of which was acquiescence in the Thirty-nine Articles. In the eighteenth century the English universities denied their honorary degrees to internationally famous men like Professor John Winthrop on the ground that they were not members of the Church of England, but at the same time conferred their honors on almost any American Congregationalist, however obscure, who might go over to the Anglican establishment. Into Victorian times they denied degrees to non-Anglicans.

The Puritan colleges, on the other hand, always maintained that non-sectarian position which has been one of their chief contributions to modern American education. The issue was joined at Harvard when its first president, Dunster, was converted to Anabaptism, which he maintained in brisk public debates with the clergy. All other Christian denominations assumed that anyone who was Baptist in theology was also an anarchist and immoral, so Dunster's public defection was intolerable. Still, he was told that if he would just stop making a public issue of his heresy, the authorities would be glad to have him stay on as president. He felt that he must give public testimony of his faith, so his resignation was reluctantly accepted. For his successor, the authorities chose Charles Chauncy, who was also known to be infected with a Baptist heresy, but was willing to agree not to spread his ideas. I do not believe that any non-Puritan college in that generation would have risked having a Baptist president.

Always, so long as there was any question of complete freedom of thought in religious matters, the college exercised its influence for liberalism. The Faculty in Cambridge was always more liberal than the Corporation, which was composed largely of Boston ministers, and the Corporation was always more liberal than the Board of Overseers, on which sat the members of the upper house of the legislature. The rules provided that the professors must be orthodox, but the evasion of the oaths was a joke. Students of all denominations were welcomed and encouraged to read to prepare themselves for the ministry of their own sects. The read-

ing of heretical books was roundly defended by the college authorities as the best means of preparing for the intellectual challenges which the students were sure to meet in later life. When the popular outcry against the defense of heretical theses in Commencement exercises became too great, the programs were altered in pen and ink, but the right to maintain both sides of a question honestly was maintained.

In the same way the Puritan colleges maintained intellectual freedom in secular matters. The situation in Europe was very different. In 1627 Lord Brooke, a member of a Puritan family, offered to endow a professorship of history which Cambridge University had long desired. The first lecturer under the endowment was a Dutchman who praised the struggle of his people against the Spanish monarchy. His use of the term "Liberties of the People" offended the English monarchists, and Laud silenced him. Under the Stuarts, the sovereigns were the head of the English Universities, but the colonists wanted none of that. Generations of students at Harvard and Yale ardently imitated the Roman republicans who were their favorite characters in history and literature.

This freedom was the most cherished possession of the Puritan colleges, and it marked their graduates indelibly. Henry Newman, a Harvard graduate who spent his life in England as a servant of the established church, would have liked to see his college more episcopal, but he warned its authorities not to apply for a royal charter lest they be bound by what he called the golden chains of the bishops.

The subject of this paper is supposed to have been "The Impact of Congregationalism on Colonial Higher Education." You will notice that I have talked around it. That is because the New England colonial colleges were an expression of Puritanism just as were town meeting government and universal free public education at the secondary school level. I have been trying without much success to grasp one spoke of a spinning wheel.

Let us sum it up by saying that the Puritan believed that reason was the talent which made a human being of the animal man. He believed that it was the duty of man to follow his reason where it led him, even if it was to what the group regarded as the errors of the Quaker meetinghouse and the Church of Rome. He never used creeds or prescribed confessions of faith. Wherever

the clergy trained at Harvard and Yale went throughout the colonies, they clashed with men trained at Brown, Princeton, and the British universities on this issue of freedom of judgment. Almost without exception, they opposed the establishment of standards of orthodoxy.

The Puritans believed that the heresies which from time to time endanger society and religion arise from ignorance, not from corruption by false ideas. To establish in the individual an immunity to such infection, the Congregational churches insisted that their ministers have four years of general college education followed by two years of wide reading in divinity.

The word "Veritas" on the seals of Harvard and Yale does not mean an ancient revealed truth which all must accept. Rather, it means the truth which the individual must seek like a personal holy grail after he has been armed with all the knowledge available to him.