

The Unitarian Takeover of Harvard and Beginning of Public Education

Jim Pederson Dyed-in-the-Wool History January 20, 2025

The Unitarian conquest of Harvard was a major event in American history that very few people are even aware of and also is linked closely to the development of the public school system and the problems that plague that system today. It also indirectly accelerated the growing sectional conflict. This material is taken largely from a book by Samuel L. Blumenthal from 1984 titled *NEA – Trojan Horse in American Education* and, apart from this book; the subject is not generally addressed in other modern texts requiring interpretation of original material. We will start the story with some background on public and private education and how this was used to promote consistent religious doctrine and culture.

Starting in the colonial period and extending to the initial creation of the public school system, Americans were probably the most literate people to ever exist. Private schools of all types, charity or free schools (generally church supported), along with private tutoring were all common. There were no regulatory agencies, accreditation boards, or text book selection committees yet people were educated including the poor (1 p. 2). The only area or group to try to impose a common education system was, not surprisingly, New England and areas where there was Puritan or Yankee migration. These common schools were created as a means of ensuring the transfer of Puritan Calvinist religion and culture from one generation to the next. Puritan leaders were also impressed with and attempting to emulate the public school system created by Martin Luther and German principalities to bring social order and consistency to the Protestant states. These acted as feeder schools to Harvard which had been created with a government grant, produced Congregationalist clergy and was generally, then as now, the gateway to elite society. This “*Bible Commonwealth*” was a network of communities all linked to a common Calvinist ideology (1 p. 3) and tied to a common legal mandate the rigidity of which varied by area although these schools were in part public funded (1 p. 5). Immigration of people from other ethno-religious cultures caused the Bible commonwealth to start to break down as early as the 1720’s however, when the state constitution of Massachusetts was written the old school structure was added and John Adams specifically drafted this article. (1 p. 4)

In the initial days of the republic, Boston was the only city to have a public school system but it was not compulsory and literacy was a requirement to enter it at age seven. The Latin School which prepared students for Harvard was the pride of the system and students came from the upper crust of Boston society. Private schools and private tutoring were flourishing and most parents preferred this. Yet in 1818 the first move to create a compulsory public education system at the expense of private education was formed. The reason given for this was that too many unsupervised children were roaming the streets because their parents couldn’t afford to send them to school (1 p. 6). Was there any truth to this? The school committee conducted a study and determined 2,360 students attended eight Boston public schools, 4,000 attended app. 150 private schools, and that only 243 children over age seven didn’t attend school. “*Charity*” schools were available to any family that couldn’t afford to send their children to school otherwise. The committee rightfully concluded that there was no need for a mandatory public education system. The promoters of the public school system then waged a press

campaign focusing on the 10% that weren't in school (2 pp. 32-3). The concept of a voucher system, as is debated today, came up but the public school advocates steadfastly opposed this because they couldn't control the content which leads us back to the subject of Harvard and changes that were taking place in elite thinking at this time.

In 1808 the Unitarians took over Harvard making the school that was supposed to defend and perpetuate Calvinist theology and puritan culture into to the center of "*religious and moral liberalism*" (1 p. 8) and anti-Calvinism. Unitarianism, which is sometimes referred to as atheism spelled with a "U", was spreading rapidly through the congregational church generally attracting the most affluent and influential members of the congregations. Unitarian churches, which would architecturally resemble the congregational churches, were spreading frequently in the immediate vicinity of the competing congregational church, and splitting the congregations.

The differences between Unitarians and the Calvinists go much further than theological arguments and represented very fundamental differences in concepts of man and God that went on to strongly influence other forms of northern Evangelicalism. In place of an all powerful Creator Redeemer God that is beyond the grasp of human intellect, the Unitarians saw a limited benevolent God largely created in the image of man. In place of scriptural authority, man's intellect and reason were the ultimate authority. Evil wasn't caused by the depravity of man but ignorance, poverty, social injustice, and various other social factors and education was the answer to it all (1 pp. 8-11). Earthly institutions were the path to perfecting the condition of man and this could not be done through independent private organizations but would need standardization which required expanded government control and those that didn't want to follow this Yankee vision of perfection would have to be "*perfected*" against their will.

This created a natural alliance with developing European socialism and in particular with Scottish business man, commentator and social activist Robert Owen and his son Robert Dale who are most known for the Owenite socialist commune, a socialist newspaper titled the Free Enquirer, and the Workingmen's Party. As is common, these practical experiments with collectivism didn't fare well which led Owen to further theorize that "*rational*" education would need to precede the creation of a true socialist society. Harvard Unitarian James G. Carter published a series of essays around Owen's concepts of education attacking private education and advocating both a common public education system and a state controlled systems of providing teachers to educate the nation's youth and spread this new gospel (1 pp. 9-11). The American form of government built around checks and balances and assuming a view of man based on historical Christian orthodoxy, however stood in the way of this although the Unitarian progressive vision was persistent and made gradual progress especially among the elite of the northeast. The Unitarians had a large percentage of affluent donors and people with enough leisure time to direct their efforts at molding society.

As traditional Christian teachings and a related Augustinian geopolitical world view gradually faded away in Northern Evangelicalism and was incrementally replaced with a new view of man as basically good but corrupted by environmental causes, the Unitarians increasingly embraced the new field of psychology. The primary definer and promoter of this was German philosopher Georg Freidrich Hegel

who formulated a process for human progress that wasn't constrained by a Biblical concept of God but was based on Pantheism where man was held as the highest representation of God. Man was "*rationale, heroic, and perfectible*" making man, and specifically collective man, godlike. Rational man would create unlimited good which was a concept that could be related to the postmillennial interpretations of Biblical end time prophecy as well as a highly optimistic view of human progress. Both of these were key characteristics of Yankee thought and culture of that era but were not part of the culture or belief system of other American cultures. (1 p. 15)

The "End of history" eschatology of the secularized puritan also aligned nicely with that of Hegel as both were globalist in nature and based on ethnic or culture superiority although in Hegel's case it was Germanic. Hegel's vision for the end of times is summarized as follows:

According to Hegel, history is a process of unfolding of the Spirit, passing through nature, changing religions and civilizations, until it reaches its culmination - the end meets the beginning, the alpha meets the omega. Through many trials and dialectical twists and turns, the Spirit that guides humanity will finally incarnate into an absolute Monarchy, a world empire that will be an empire of the Spirit. Its power will be transferred to a supreme autocrat, an enlightened monarch-philosopher. Capitalism and civil society will only be a phase in the unfolding of this process, and scientific materialism will pass into purely spiritual angelic science. Hegel believed that this would happen in Germany (the German Empire did not yet exist at the time) and would be the triumph of spiritual culture and German philosophy.(3) Alexander Dugin

Although the Puritan "City on a Hill" vision predated the influence of Hegel, it would be very reasonable to assume that adoption of Hegelian ideas by the Unitarians added structure to their mission which is reflected in northern political and northern Protestantism or evangelicalism leading to the War Between the States and in American and world politics since then. Neither Hegel nor his Unitarian counterparts were the first to deal with these concepts but they were the most effective at moving them forward. In the 20th century there were three dominant versions of this; those being Anglo-American, Germanic, and Marxist with the Anglo-American neo-liberalism variant surviving two world wars and the Cold War to be locked in a current life and death struggle with developing regional civilization based cultures and their own populations.

While the Unitarians by the early 1800's had a persistent vision and mission coupled with wealth and influence, a dominant press presence, and control of institutional power, they were still a very small group relative to the overall population and were entirely regional. The idea of a mandatory public education system was contrary to the broader culture and was to continue to be a difficult idea to sell. The Common School idea would need to be advanced by dividing the opposition. The primary person responsible for doing this was Horace Mann who more than any person is credited with aligning enough non-Unitarian support to sell the idea (1 pp. 26-27). The broader secularization of Northern Evangelicalism along with ethno religious divisions was the key to this fairly remarkable political accomplishment. The primary opposition to the Unitarians was the Northern Calvinists although they too were gradually secularizing and had a lot of political commonality with the Unitarians. The rapidly

growing immigrant communities consisting principally of Catholics and liturgical high church Germanic Lutherans were establishing their own schools which are still functioning and are generally held in high regard academically today. The liturgical Lutherans weren't necessarily seen as enemies by the Evangelicals at this time but the Catholics were regarded as a religious and cultural threat of the highest order. Reverend Lyman Beecher in 1835 in his *"Plea for the West"* essay warned of a *"Popish conspiracy"*. His associate Calvin Stowe, who had traveled to Prussia and strongly supported the state controlled Prussian education system, urged American Protestants to *"put aside sectarian differences and unite to defend Protestant Republic America against 'Romish designs'"*. (1 p. 27)

This led the conservatives to tentatively support a compromise with the secularist that would preserve in the common schools some degree of basic Christian concepts while remaining at their core secular. The time frame for this was the mid to late 1840's although this varied by state and only applied to the northern states. There was still a fear of secularism but this gradually proved to be less than the fear of Catholics and the general attitude held true for northern protestants and groups that derived from northern protestants into the mid to late 20th century. Rev Edward Beecher's book, *"The Papal Conspiracy Exposed"*, in 1855 was a factor in many politically active northern Protestants siding with the secularists against the Catholics and putting aside the idea of starting their own schools for the next hundred years. Catholics also struggled with the idea of using the common schools because of the cost but the anti-Catholic teachings and attitudes of the Evangelicals led the Catholics to fully commit to forming their own school system by the 1850's. A Catholic spokesman from the time wrote of this decision: (1 pp. 28-30)

"So far as Catholics are concerned, the system of Common Schools in the country is a monstrous engine of injustice and tyranny. Practically, it operates a gigantic scheme for proselytism. By numerous secret appliances, and sometimes by open or imperfectly disguised machinery, the faith of our children is gradually undermined and they are trained up to be ashamed of and to abandon the religion of their fathers. This is bad enough if it was all done with the money of others; but when it is accomplished, at least in part, by our own money, it is really atrocious. It is not to be concealed or denied that the so-called literature of this country, the taste for which is fostered by Common Schools, and which is constantly brought to bear on the training of our children, is not of a character to form their tender minds to wholesome moral principles, much less to solid Christian piety. In general, so far as it professes to be religious, it is anti-Catholic, and so far as it is secular, it is pagan." (4)

The catholic issue had settled the question of public funding for church based private education in general although it would come up from time to time in specific areas. Secularism would be the basis for public education and protestant believers would ultimately have to put aside any form of Christian belief or defense of the faith in order to participate. (1 pp. 29-30)

Bibliography

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