

Samuel Eliot Morison's Tercentenary Lament: Harvard Adrift on the High Seas of Secularist Scholarship.

A Commentary On Samuel Eliot Morison's Address
 "Harvard's Past", 7 November 1935

by Bruce C Wearne*

In section 3 of his *Tercentenary Lament* - 'The Note of Religion' -¹ we have presented in succinct form Samuel Eliot Morison's "Harvard view" of the relationship between the university and religion. "The College was a religious foundation," he writes. The word "was" structures all of the subsequent argument. Despite there being phrases and turns in the argument which might suggest that Morison regrets the development away from Christianity, thus placing himself somewhat within, rather than outside, the original founding framework of Harvard, it is yet true that the historical development is presented fatefully as an inevitable regression-declension from Christian faith. This regression is not only presented as a move of Christian conviction away from the centre of Harvard's life and thought: it is a move away from Christian conviction in the sense of assurance of profession.

"Christianity was the inspiration, and the unifying force of all their studies." Colonial students were instructed within the framework of John Harvard's aim for the College, "to lay *Christ* in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning". But, Morison observed,

the spirit of religion in the University has been ebbing during the last century. Instead of learning by and for religion, we are fortunate if we can make a religion of learning.

It is in this way presumably that Harvard had disappointed the expectations and aspirations of its founders. Rather than learning being endowed with ultimate meaning by virtue of its being a means to an All-Inclusive End, the turn away from the direction set by its puritan found-

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1 Reproduced below as an appendix.

ers has been interpreted as a necessary integration within the task of learning itself. With the onset of post-puritanism learning, scholarship and theoretical endeavour could be treated as an end unto itself, says Morison.

The strange and forbidding logic of Puritanism had turned men's minds to the science of this world. When seen in the retrospective light of history this is indeed mysterious, Morison implies. But the logic which inspired men broke down. This puritan rationale of intellectual engagement, which had spurred the development of the scientific mind, broke down under the weight of its own antinomies and ambiguities.

Reference should be made here to the long post-puritan tradition which has painted Calvin as a *bête noir*. RK Merton presents a view of Calvin in his famous work in the sociology of science, *Science, Technology and Society in Seventeenth Century England* (1936) which is a good example of a perspective which simply assumes that it knows what Calvin meant to say. On the basis of a sociological formulaic insight Merton could claim to explain why the Calvinist traditions which flowed from him contributed to western thought in such an ambiguous and contradictory manner.

In contrast to RT Kendall,² for instance, who saw in English Puritanism a movement toward dogmatic scholasticism, Merton is certain that the process moved in the opposite direction: from dogmatism to a more liberal and opened-up conception of science.

Again there must be no confusion between Calvin's own teachings and those of the subsequent Calvinist-Puritan movement [note], particularly in England, for the latter represents a marked development of the Great Reformer's conceptions, rather than a rigid maintenance of them.³

The footnote reads:

One of the basic results of this study is the fact that the most significant influence of Puritanism upon science was largely unintended by the Puritan leaders. That Calvin himself deprecated science only enhances the paradox that from him stemmed a vigorous movement which furthered interest in this very field.

This view that Calvin (possibly like the rest of us) had no real idea of the consequences of his doctrinal reformation is further developed where Merton says:

² RT Kendall, *Calvin and English Puritanism to 1649*, Oxford, 1979.

³ Merton, *Science*, 56-9.

Calvin's point of view, which closely resembled [the patristic view of God's secret will] was submerged by the implications of his other tenets, which led to directly opposed developments.⁴

A religion - understood here, as throughout this essay, as those ethical and moral beliefs and practices which constitute a system of faith and worship, that is, as a religious ethic - may indirectly promote the cultivation of science, although specific scientific discoveries are at the same time vehemently attacked by theologians, who suspect their possibly subversive nature. Precisely because this pattern of interlocking and contradictory forces is so often analysed, it is imperative that we distinguish clearly between the intentions and aims of religious leaders and the (frequently unforeseen) consequences of this teaching.⁵ Once this pattern is clearly understood, it is not surprising or inconsistent that Luther particularly, and Melancthon less strongly, execrated the cosmology of Copernicus. In magisterial mood, Luther berates the Copernican theory: "Der Narr will die ganze kunst Astronomiae unkehren, aber wie die heilige Schrift angeigt, so hieß Josua die Sonne still stehen, und nicht das Erdreich".⁶ Likewise Calvin frowned upon the acceptance of numerous scientific discoveries of his day, whereas the religious ethic which stemmed from him inevitably inspired the pursuit of natural science.⁷

This development [ie science taking on a new life of its own] was particularly retarded in Geneva because there the authority resting in Calvin himself, rather than in the implications of his religious system, was not soon dissipated.⁸

It is in a similar mood to this that Morison has painted the secularisation of Harvard College. But it is well to reckon with the fact that this view was well entrenched at Harvard by the time both Morison and Merton were to proffer their historiographic formulations in 1936. Puritanism's hold over the intellectual direction of the College had to subside.

It could hardly have been otherwise; for the Puritan creed was too illogical for the human intellect, and too severe for human nature.

Here Logic as an external "cause" is replaced by logic as an internal arrangement of elements. And within Puritanism the Logic had, in ef-

⁴ *Ibid.*, 73 n 56.

⁵ Here there is a footnote that refers to Tawney and Calvin's lauding of science *Coram Deo*. See below.

⁶ Here there is a footnote to E Troeltsch, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, 1930, Vol II, 879-80.

⁷ Merton, *Science*, 100. My emphasis.

fect, encouraged logic which had in turn radically undermined the originally taken-for-granted Logic of christian motivation. John Harvard's style of Puritanism had promoted the establishment of the College at Cambridge, Massachusetts. But the College, in action, had not only promoted Puritanism, it also promoted, and was promoted by, a christian reforming zeal to go further and better, with a tolerational spirit which sought a better understanding of the kind of religious understanding wherein they stood. Here we witness the development of a particular kind of Christian desire to remain known as Christian even though one wishes to dispense with one's traditional (and presumably less than tolerant) label. Tolerationism, within protestant Christianity, would make a public virtue out of disclaiming one's own religious roots, especially when they are judged to be inherently intolerant in the light of the newly discovered wisdom one is seeking to promote in the present.

Even before the end of the seventeenth century the stricter Puritans were dissatisfied with Harvard; for learning had taught the teachers the defects in their forebears' creed, and they were reaching out for something broader and better. Yet the College stood stoutly for historic Christianity in the larger sense against the various sects into which Puritanism was breaking up.

Read in its historical and ecclesiastical context of Congregational Establishmentarianism, which characterised Massachusetts, we have a vision of Puritanism dissolving internally. However we need also to see this in terms of:

- a. the American revolution and the search for a coherent nationalism;
- b. the religious pluralism inherent in the American colonies and "read into" the American constitution by the first amendment concerning the constituted prevention of the US Congress to make any law concerning the establishment of any religion;⁸ and
- c. the ongoing movement of the Enlightenment.

Breaking up the Puritan movement may have been, but what precisely was it which was breaking up? Could it have been a Cambridge Platonist interpretation of the intellectual character of the Enlightenment? Its own internal dissolution - namely the severity of its presumed Logic - cannot explain it on its own.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁹ K Greenwalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice*, 1988.

George Whitefield had noted Harvard's low temperature. It was from this time that, according to Morison, Harvard became known for its "indifference" and it has maintained such a label ever since. Morison sides with the idea that an academic community should be characterised by its quiet scepticism; and it is in this public service that Harvard has made its contribution, he says. But it was with an open candour, Morison notes, that Harvard approached the teaching of its students. Its freedom from ties of a confessional, creedal or ecclesiastical character to any one church or group of churches gives to the Harvard community a peculiar freedom at once precarious, lonely and inspiring.

By keeping clear of sectarian reefs, Harvard finally floated off from Christianity altogether; and it is a little lonely on the high seas of philosophy! Fifty years ago the logical step was taken of abolishing compulsory chapel, and making Christianity, as it were, a free elective. Yet this loss is a part of the price we paid to become a university. The medieval universities, to be sure, were schools of the Church; but Harvard grew up after the unity of Christianity had been shattered. Loyalty to one particular sect would have hampered the search for truth, and prevented that universality of learning which is required of a modern university.

Here we encounter the peculiar relationship between Harvard's post-Puritan contra-sectarian Christianity and voluntarism as a religious alternative. Almost as a Christian existentialist, Morison feels the spiritual loneliness of the twentieth-century seeker after spiritual truth, if not historical insight.

Is there not a hint of critique here: "making Christianity, as it were, a free elective"? The Evangelical wing of Christianity would protest that "Christianity is Christ - a personal relationship - and cannot be contained within an 'elective'." The 'main-line' churches would see this as an opting out by the institution into a bland moralistic Christianity without any committed goals for a social-communal love in action. Yet Harvard tries to steer a middle course, implies Morison, which wanted to be christian, open minded and scientific. It cannot be denied that the 'Christian Ideal' is central for Harvard, but its way of developing its life in response to this ideal is to form a forum in which all scholars are equally at 'home'. Is this the Harvard ethic and the spirit of Arminianism? Those spiritually attuned to the original puritan logic might find themselves excluded as "stern calvinists" and indeed would experience an intense loneliness on the high seas of this secularistic scholarship and ideology.

Underlying the resultant programme, implies Morison, is the quiet puritan confidence that it is within such a commonwealth of knowledge and research that the scholar who is inspired truly by christian ideals

can make a timely, pertinent, historical and helpful contribution.

It is clear that Morison's "whig" (or secularised whig) rendering of Harvard's past, contains many themes that are reminiscent of "reformational philosophy" and the Kuyperian view of the university. It is also clear that there are serious problems with the Harvard view of religion (and its relation to the university) but it is not so easy to pinpoint exactly what those weaknesses are. Nor is it so simple to disentangle them from the real and to-be-welcomed strengths of the Harvard position.

The centre point of Morison's position, the heart of his peculiar dilemma, arises out of his attempt to present a Christian voluntarism.

Religion cannot be an effective and positive force in any school or university unless that school is tied to some particular communion.

Here the unifying power of religion is viewed as being mediated by "some communion" - religion may not be sectarian but in the era in which Harvard grew up religion had become more and more sectional.¹⁰ But can any school or university be effectively and positively coordinated without the bind of some religious communion?¹¹

Morison is perplexed no doubt by the issue since he has noted en passant that once learning was expressive of a sincere and pious religious devotion to "lay Christ at the bottom", whereas now Harvard had inverted the relation - Christianity is one area of life in which the scholarly devotion to "lay learning itself at the bottom" prevailed. Hence religious piety is prone to run counter to the piety and civility - the good republican virtues - of the post-puritan community of scholarly toleration.

This is the Harvard form of the *devotio moderna*. Morison is not wrong where he points to the supposed victory of the supposed doctrine of human autonomy in the hearts and lives of those who increasingly took charge of Harvard's secularised polity. But the picture is muted; there is an inner reluctance, also shown in Morison's other works, to

10 On the abolition of compulsory chapel and the role of the Unitarians see WW Fenn, "The Theological School 1869-1928," in SE Morison (ed), *The Development of Harvard University Since the Inauguration of President Eliot 1869-1929*, Harvard, 1930, 463-71, esp 464-5. It is of note that the decision to make chapel voluntary is lauded on the basis of the immediate and significant rise in chapel numbers.

11 If not the "sectarian" religion of one of Protestantism's many sects then perhaps the monolithic and hegemonic "common sense" civil religion of the American Republic.

face up to the fact that this involved a "historical takeover". After all a tolerationist historiography will not want to exclude John Harvard from the history of the college which took his name!

But as a christian thinker, if that is what Morison was, he seems to have succumbed to the supposed victory of the supposed autonomy postulate through a dogmatic anti-dogmatism which capitulates to history as to an inexorable fate. He assumes that to ask the critical question of the doctrine of human autonomy is, of necessity, caught up in an alternative dogmatism. For him Christian-puritan thinkers are those who derive their sense of autonomy from reliance upon an objective, external revelation of truth. Religious preference is something tied inextricably to personal liberty in both the private and public spheres. Self worth and confidence to participate in a tolerant democratic society depends on the self worth which derives from one's store of private capital, material or other. Hence at the back of his analysis is an uncriticised acceptance of the ideological presumptions of the USA - that nation which has built itself into, and marketed itself as, the embodiment of the modern way - scholarship and economy.

For Morison "the unity of Christianity has been shattered". Presumably the founding of the United States, and its initial puritan experiment, was the last great attempt to restore that unity. It failed. The residue was the public legal order of toleration in its premier modern sense. It may still have some puritan traditions clinging to its body politic, but the inner structuring principle has changed fundamentally. With the disappearance of that christian unity in an historical sense, there is little left but for serious christian believers to track back into their chapels and reminisce about what might have been if we had not become so enlightened.

Morison's dilemma is that his historical investigations tell him of the decline of Christianity while he knows that for him as a western man "the way to God leads through history".¹² In his search he hears/overhears/discovers that the search is at root inconclusive. The Calvinist doctrine of human reassurance of our creational stand *Coram Deo* in the light of the work of Jesus Christ has all but dissipated. Even the assured unity of the search, in a subjective sense, holds only minimal hope. One can find perhaps a measure of publicly endorsed confidence in a community of shared virtues - but even here the ultimate worth of the

12 L. Sperry in a sermon preached on Day 2 of the Tercentenary Celebrations in 1936. *The Tercentenary of Harvard College: A Chronicle of the Tercentenary Year 1935-1936*, Harvard, 1937, 112.

shared scholarly quiet scepticism and institutionalised "Harvard indifference" can only be speculated upon. It is another piece of data which can be subjected, again, to the same scrutiny.

This emergent world-view does not base the inconclusiveness of religious conviction in the emergence of science and its method, but for Morison it is given on the basis of the shattered unity of Christianity. Whereas for positivism Christianity had to be reconstructed, Harvard's approach is a capitulation to fate and a subjection to the demands of a scientific and democratic society which of necessity sees Christian profession marginalised and turned into an optional discipline.

Appendix

Section 3 of Samuel Elliot Morison's Tercentenary Address "Harvard's Past"¹³

3. The Note of Religion

Lest we be thought to indulge in too much pride, let us now consider an aspect in which Harvard disappointed the expectations of her founders. The College was a religious foundation. Christianity was the inspiration, and the unifying force of all their studies. Like Augustine and Aquinas, the Puritans accounted pride of knowledge a deadly sin; and colonial students were instructed "to lay Christ in the bottom, as the only foundation of all sound knowledge and learning." But the spirit of religion in the University has been ebbing during the last century. Instead of learning by and for religion, we are fortunate if we can make a religion of learning. It could hardly have been otherwise: for the Puritan creed was too illogical for the human intellect, and too severe for human nature.

Even before the end of the seventeenth century the stricter Puritans were dissatisfied with Harvard: for learning had taught the teachers defects in their forebears' creed, and they were reaching out for something broader and better. Yet the College stood stoutly for historic Christianity in the larger sense against the various sects into which Puritanism was breaking up. During the great religious revival of 1741, the evangelist Whitefield found Harvard College in what to him seemed a shockingly low state of religious temperature - his "hot-gospel" left the College cold. It was then, in 1741, that the cry of "Harvard indifference" was first raised: it has often been heard since, and there is truth in the charge. For this academic community has been singularly cool to emotional appeals: whether religious, political, or (of late) economic in nature; and an attitude of quiet scepticism, of willingness to hear combined with reluctance to commit oneself or act, is never popular. A century ago, the abolitionists regarded Harvard as a stronghold of the slave power; and our Southern friends reproached us for not stamping out the abolition menace. Nineteen years ago, the University was be-

¹³ Reprinted in "A Chronicle of the Tercentenary Year," in *The Tercentenary of Harvard College*, Harvard, 1937, 47-62.

ing attacked in super-patriotic quarters because she declined to drop German literature from her curriculum, or to expel from her midst certain scholars who were unable conscientiously to support a war which brought the world nothing but impoverishment, suffering, and sorrow. Two years ago one of my colleagues was asked why the Department of Economics was not conspicuously active in the New Deal. His answer was typical: "We are standing by for the next New Deal!" Today there is one subject on which Communists and professional patriots are agreed - that Harvard University is not performing her supposed duty of telling youth what they should think; incidentally giving our Faculty the implied compliment of assuming that our students would think as they are told.

And many religious people, with more reason, feel the same way about it: let us face the matter frankly. Religion cannot be an effective and positive force in any school or university unless that school is tied to some particular communion. A vague cult of uplift and goodwill appeals to very few young people. By keeping clear of sectarian reefs, Harvard finally floated off from Christianity altogether; and it is a little lonely on the high seas of philosophy! Fifty years ago the logical step was taken of abolishing compulsory chapel, and making Christianity, as it were, a free elective. Yet this loss is a part of the price that we paid to become a university. The mediaeval universities, to be sure, were schools of the Church; but Harvard grew up after the unity of Christianity had been shattered. Loyalty to one particular sect would have hampered the search for truth, and prevented that universality of learning which is required in a modern university.

It is not of natural science that I am thinking. The so-called warfare of science against theology is mere shadow-boxing, as our own history proves. When Harvard was still under sectarian control, Thomas Brattle made observations of the comet of 1680 that were praised by Sir Isaac Newton; and Professor John Winthrop, the most distinguished colonial scientist, friend of Franklin and teacher of Count Rumford, was a faithful communicant of the Congregational Church. From such beginnings as these, which took place within the strict Puritan framework, every scientific achievement of the nineteenth century was possible without closing the door on religion. It was the strength that Christianity still had in Cambridge of the mid-nineteenth century, which prevented Harvard scientists making fools of themselves when Darwin was hailed as a prophet of atheism; Asa Gray for instance described himself as "in his own fashion a Darwinian," philosophically a convinced theist, religiously a believer in the Nicene Creed. But if the religious affiliations of every new professorial appointment had been inquired into, with a view to training up the youth in some particular communion; and if teaching, writing, and research had been circumscribed within some religious orthodoxy, Harvard could never have become an important seat of learning. Imagine William James being told by a clerical President, "I wish you would be a little more careful of what you say, Mr. James: some of the parents are worried by the notions you put in the young men's heads!" Santayana has written that the "odor of brimstone lingered" in the Harvard of his day, but I doubt whether it was sensible to any but his delicate Iberian nostrils.