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## Veritas at Harvard

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Veritas at Harvard

by

Alfred John Zucker

A research paper presented to the

Faculty of the Department of  
Theological Studies  
Loyola Marymount University

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Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in Theology

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### Abstract

The purpose of this research paper is to analyze a historical, theological subject concerning the rationale for the transition from a Puritanical view of God at Harvard in the early seventeenth century to a Utilitarian perspective in the first part of the nineteenth century. The Puritans had a profound effect on Harvard, bringing with them severe discipline and an authoritarian view of God. As a result, many of the first Harvard students left the college never to return,<sup>1</sup> and the school had significant difficulties in maintaining an enrollment in its early years. Puritanism viewed students as being essentially depraved and only allowed to live by the grace of God. The Cambridge community portrayed the Lord as being an almost heartless, judgmental father, whose main concern was the discipline of the wayward children. This perspective led to regular beatings, cruelty, and a lack of concern for scholarship that encouraged the pursuit of multiple points of view.

However with the coming of Romanticism and Unitarianism to Massachusetts in the early part of the nineteenth century, there was an emerging, change in the nature of truth with respect to God. The people envisioned the Lord, as a kindly parent, who was primarily concerned with the happiness of the individual and the community. With this perspective came a drastically different view of theology, wherein all points of view had to be examined and understood. The rigidity of Puritanism gave way to the more liberal Unitarianism, and God became part of a joyous experience of living.

This paper examines the change that occurred at Harvard with respect to the University's view of God and its impact on the academic curricula. It considers the reasons for the change and the view of the students, faculty, and administration. It analyzes how changes within a community can have a profound influence on changes within a college, and it provides a basis for academic freedom that is the basis for academic freedom—a concept that was alien to the Puritans. The key question is whether it

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<sup>1</sup> George M. Marsden. *The Soul of the American University* (Oxford: Oxford, 1994) 33-5.

has been successful in shaping the development of academia or whether it has caused more chaos than success?

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to research an historical, theological subject carefully, in order to determine the causes for and the effects of the transition from a Puritanical view of God in the 1600s to the liberal concept of the Lord in the early 1800s, as it relates to one Ivy League university. The focus of this research is on the academic community at Harvard, while it occurred at almost every one of the nation's earliest college—especially the Ivy Leagues. The participants in the scholarly community—the students, faculty, staff, and administration. The University first started from a completely Puritan perspective—a severe, cold, view of God, who allows humans to live only by his grace.<sup>2</sup> The punishments that the teachers (usually ministers) handed down for even a minor transgression were very severe, and most of the earlier students found it too difficult to endure the rigidity of the Puritans. Their educators exhibited a great concern over the role of the devil and kept the pupils in constant fear. The intellectual and theological perspective was that there was only one answer to every theological question, and the pursuit of knowledge was discouraged by the faculty and the student tutors. The teachers considered God to be very severe and harsh and had little patience with students regardless of their adolescent age. They believe their perspective was the will of God. People argued that God expected students to be perfect and to act in “His” image—a standard that was very difficult for most students to attain. The Puritans instilled a strong guilt complex in the students, and they were always unforgiving. They had little respect for consistent academic scholarship, to such an extent that they never encouraged students to consider alternative points of view. They believed that other perspectives were the work of the devil.

They believed their role was to challenge the students to behave in a Godly manner.<sup>3</sup> The emphasis in the educational system, with respect to God, was that the Lord was harsh, demanding, and had little

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<sup>2</sup> Charles Wagner. *Harvard: Four Centuries and Freedom*. (New York: Dutton, 1950), Ch. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

patience with alternative points of view, except those in strict conformance with Old Testament texts. The educational system was severe because students feared the punishments of God coming down upon them, as in days of old, in the event that they departed from strict biblical injunctions. This created a frightening theological environment that denied students the right to pursue alternative points of view, because the prevailing belief was that there was one and only one answer to each question. To depart from that response was totally unacceptable. Students feared not only the wrath of God, but that of their teachers, whenever the pupils decided to examine an alternative answer or point of view. It also created an austere environment where students consistently feared learning rather than enjoyed the educational process.

With the coming of the Romantics, personified in the Unitarians, in the early 1800s, the image of God began to change slowly. Students and teachers had previously found their educational system too strict and demanding. It was consistently unwilling to consider multiple possible answers to a question. The new philosophy encouraged kindness and patience and the willingness to explore many possible responses to question. The conversion did not come quickly, and the old Puritan masters, who still held considerable power and exhibited fear over the control of the devil. However, many faculty members and students were already greatly upset over the perception of the Lord as being nothing more than a harsh taskmaster, and they wanted to believe in a God, who was more humane. They also believed that academia should look at alternative answers to questions and issues. They argued that this belief was the reason colonials attempted to escape persecution in Europe where there was only a single answer to each problem.

While they believed in a system of strict discipline, they were upset with the excessive beatings and harsh punishments that the Puritans handed down for every error and offense. Therefore, they turned to Romanticism and Unitarianism, which to them were the same. This paper will examine their

rationale, philosophy, and conversion and above all, its effects on changing theology and its effects on the American private educational system, especially that at Harvard.

#### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In the classic work on the change from Puritanism to Romanticism (*Three Centuries at Harvard*), Samuel Eliot Morison explores the complexity of reasons for the change and the political factors behind the conversion. He shows that the change did not come easily, but was a reflection of the hostility that the people of the Harvard community had against the way of life at Harvard. He presents the situation as inevitable, and the only resolution to the problems that the Puritan way of teaching caused. Likewise, his perspective is supported by considerable evidence in Chapter 1 of *The Soul of the American University* by George M. Marsden. He argues that Puritanism had gone too far in its extremism, exemplified by the Salem Witch Trials and other punishments, and that Harvard was responding to the anger in the community.

Charles Wagner, in *Harvard: Four Centuries and Freedom*, reiterates the position that Morison and Marsden advocated, but he brings it forward to the present time by showing that the change led to the level of academic freedom that we have today in the college community. Further, it provided a more effective working environment for the students and faculty where fear did not predominate and where alternative points of view could be examined critically. Likewise, Richard Norton Smith argues in *The Harvard Century: The Making of a University to a Nation* that the changing perception of God was essential to human progress and academic achievement. He believed that maintaining the Puritanical system was actually dangerous to the development of the American culture and way of life. John Henry Newman, in *The Idea of a University*, was a devoted theologian who also believed that the University must be free to explore a diversity of positions, or it would fail.

Another theologian, Nathan Pusey, a former President of Harvard, was more traditional and argued for some of the Puritan positions. However, in “Freedom, loyalty, and the American University,” he stated that there must be considerable freedom to explore God’s role in academia. Likewise, Samuel Eliot Morison, in *The Founding of Harvard College*, discusses the roots of Puritanism in the American educational system and analyzes how its lack of freedom caused many problems in the development of Harvard. In his *The Development of Harvard College*, he demonstrates how the power of the Puritans, especially through its clergy, had a profound effect on the early development of the college, but shows that there were significant problems associated with this perspective. At the same time, he cautions against the excessive reliance on Unitarianism as being a point of view where almost anything related to God is accepted, and where long-held traditions often go by the wayside without careful analysis. In Josiah Quincy, a former nineteenth century Harvard president, in *The History of Harvard University*, he warns against a strict department from the discipline of its founders. He sees some advantages of the Romantics, but like others he argues for a more biblically based view of God.

E.J. Kahn, in *Harvard Through Change and Through Storm*, shows that this first major crisis at Harvard threatened to tear apart the entire college and end the experiment in collegiate education in America.<sup>4</sup> Enlightened and effective leadership, who recognized the need for change to another theological perspective, saved the University from disaster.

#### ARGUMENT (Substantiating the Thesis)

First, the leadership of the college had to understand the nature of Puritanism and its effect on the academic community. Puritan leaders, who were frequently clergy, were extremely doctrinaire and one-

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. See also *Three Centuries at Harvard*, Introd.



sided in their perspective. The Mather family was very powerful in maintaining a harsh view of God on the campus. Puritans argued that whenever anyone or any group historically went against or did something different than the strictest perspective in the Old Testament, God came down and punished them severely. Examples abound from theology, as when the Lord punished the Hebrews over and over again for their departure from a strict perspective, as in the case of both Northern and Southern Israel, who were known for their evil kings and who brought unbelievable suffering from the Lord upon the people. The leaders warned the faculty and the students that God would not tolerate any departure from His ways, and that he would quickly and decisively bring punishment upon those who dared to challenge the Lord or bring forth new ways of thought.

In keeping with this perspective the Puritans wrought terrifying punishments upon the students for even the slightest transgressions or for failure to master their lessons, which were extremely difficult. The pupils had to master Greek and Latin and recite biblical passages in multiple languages, as well as explain their meanings. The clergy argued that these students had to accomplish the assigned task in order to carry out the will of God. The Lord demanded discipline—strict and consistent as a reflection of devotion to Him. The Mathers and other clerical leaders beat the students to accomplish this goal. The clergy believed that their conduct was God's will. They saw any transgression as the work of the devil, who represented the darkness in the world, and they moved quickly to punish or eradicate it. The Puritans feared the devil more than they feared God. They believed that the devil was everywhere trying to thwart the will of God, and they fought against it.

The problem of the Puritans started in the Middle Ages, when the people had to cope with the feudal lords who ruled Europe for many centuries.<sup>5</sup> The people who were ancestors of the Puritans lived in endless fear for their lives, and religion played a significant role in that fear. The powerful Church

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<sup>5</sup> Anatole G. Mazour and John M. Peoples. *Men and Nations* (New York: Harcourt, 1975), 198-203.

wanted to maintain its influence on the people, and they taught the populace—most of whom were highly illiterate—that the evil conditions that predominated were the work of the devil acting against God. As such, the public was indoctrinated to believe that the bible (especially the Old Testament) had to be followed exactly in order to protect them from the harm that the devil would imbue within them. Further, the leaders taught them that God would punish them for any transgression that they did. Examples were given from Old Testament text, going back to the story of Adam and Eve. It was dangerous, usually lethal to violate God’s will, because, in essence, the person was going against the Lord and doing the work of the devil. This concept was enhanced by the idea of witchcraft, which the Puritans saw as the work of the evil one, and which they believed had to be eradicated by removing the evil people from society, usually through some form of execution.

As such, in Medieval Europe, Puritans severely punished all forms of transgressions within society, and they tolerated no criticism or questioning of biblical text. They had a very harsh culture that was reflective of the environment in which they lived. Medieval life was by its very nature very strict and organized around life in the manor.<sup>6</sup> They raised their children with such a strict discipline, and beatings were common. The motto was “to beat the devil out of the young.” This became the foundation of the Puritan culture that eventually moved with them to England, and that finally came to Harvard when it was founded in 1636.

When the Puritans moved to England, they confronted the more liberal Episcopal Church of Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth, and they were frightened by the prospect of their children growing up and being educated in this environment. With the development of Protestantism, there was a strong emphasis on technology and science—to be the basis of education, but the Puritans saw the work of the devil in these educational programs, if they did not serve the word of the Lord.<sup>7</sup> As such, there was a

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198-9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 2223-300.

tremendous conflict between the Puritans and the Episcopalians, which eventually lead the Puritans to fear for their lives. They feared the British monarchy and its power, and they began to consider other alternatives for the practice of their theology. Eventually, they sought refuge in Holland, where there was religious freedom, and where they could teach their children their way of life.

However, when they moved to Holland, another major problem emerged. Life in the new country was not only very liberal, so was the educational system. The new culture exposed the children to a completely different form of life, and most of the adolescents were attracted to it. Again, the Puritans believed that they were losing their children to an alien form of life that threatened the beliefs of their young people and that would lead them to the devil. They pleaded with the King of England for ships to go to the New World in order to escape the condition that they faced, and the government of England were happy to get rid of them. England gave them the ships and supplies they requested in order to get the Puritans out of the continent, and 102 of them moved to the New World. Once in the new land, they faced horrifying conditions which strengthened their resolve to be strict and severe. They lost half of their members from illness during the first year, and they attributed the tragedy to the work of the devil. They lead a very severe life of hard work and no play, and they tried to impose this life on their children. It was out of this world that Harvard emerged.

The crisis increased with the endless stream of witch trials that engulfed New England during the seventeenth century. Salem was but one example of the severity by which the Puritans sought to escape the work of the devil. However, life was very harsh in the new country, and they continued to sustain suffering, which they perceived as the work of the devil, and they sought refuge by turning the God and promising to be good and follow the principles of the Old Testament.

When Harvard first started in 1636, the first headmaster, Nathan Eaton was determined to impose on the six students who attended a severity of discipline that reflected the Puritan belief system

and culture. Eaton gave them a sparse diet and beat them continuously for every error they made in their studies. The headmaster emphasized a “doctrine of the priesthood for all believers.” He emphasized “the necessity for the cultivation of an educated laity, well-catechized, and instructed in God’s word.”<sup>8</sup> To him, that meant a severe and rigid interpretation of biblical text and the rote memorization without error of that text in Greek and Latin, and he enforced it with such cruelty and rigidity that the students reached a point where they could no longer cope with the endless beatings that they endured for their errors. Further, the teaching assistant, an older adolescent was equally punished to such a point where he also rebelled. All of the students without exception ran away from the school leaving the headmaster with a college and no one to teach. The parents tried to get the students to return, but they met with little success. The first college in Puritan America met with little success, and it looked for a short time that the Harvard experiment had failed.

The Board of Overseers met to consider the situation, and although they believed in harsh discipline, they realized that the situation could not continue. They fired Eaton, but not for beating the students, because they believed this would give the community a message that ran counter to the Puritan way of conduct. Instead, Eaton was dismissed “for not giving the students enough good quality food and beer.” (Harvard Archives). He became the only one of Harvard’s chief administrators to be fired, although three others were pressured into resignation.

The Board recognized that they had to reform the school, so they closed the college for the 1637 year in order to consider how to maintain the strict discipline while not encouraging the type of student rebellion that had occurred. They too were descendants of Medieval Puritans, and they had come to America in order to establish a Puritan way of life. They had no intention of abandoning it, but they also recognized that they had to maintain a student body in order to have a college. They called upon the

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<sup>8</sup> Marsden, *Ibid.*, 33.

Mathers, who were the significant ministers of that era to make suggestions, and they decided to choose a president who would both maintain high standards but move away from the consistent beatings. The second group of students entered the school in 1638 and faced a new faculty who had been educated in England's Emmanuel College,<sup>9</sup> which was strictly Puritanical, but which did not rely on beating in order to inculcate knowledge. The Puritans strictly enforced their educational philosophy, because of their tradition. However, they tried to be more humane in dealing with the students.

For the next two centuries, the Puritans continued to be very severe with students. They insisted on absolute fealty to the Old Testament and required the students to master Latin and Greek, as a condition of understanding the various writings related to their religious philosophy. They also insisted that the students master Hebrew to understand the Old Testament texts. They placed little or no emphasis on the New Testament—which was paradoxical, since they were a Protestant religion.

Nonetheless, the rigidity continued both in the classroom at Harvard and in the community surrounding the University. They required the faculty to swear absolute fealty to the Old Testament, and most of the conversation between the various segments of the college staff centered on biblical text.<sup>10</sup> In studying the Puritan philosophy, as well as that of the Mather family that had a significant influence on the early development of Harvard, it is consistently evident that the Puritans believed in a very strict interpretation of religious text primarily because they feared the devil and also the wrath of God for any transgressions.

Why did the Puritans impose this philosophy of absolutism at Harvard. First, I have shown their history, going back to the Middle Ages, influenced them significantly in their pursuit of religious absolutism. They gave many examples of what happened to people when they violated any of God's

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<sup>9</sup> Marsden, *Ibid*, 39.

<sup>10</sup> Harvard Archive Document (1759) related to the faculty meetings and conversations.

commandments in the Old Testament. They were a frightened people who believed that the devil was there constantly challenging the will of God, and that believers had to protect themselves from the work of the evil one in order to survive without experiencing the wrath of the Lord. All of the evidence has shown that their belief system was based on what they perceived as a historical tradition, and they could defend it by many explicit examples.

Second, they also believed that a great deal of wrong occurred in society because of the more liberal religions that did not rigidly follow biblical text. They cited all of the evil that was taking place in England as a reflection of Episcopalian beliefs and the willingness of their clergy to experiment with religious ideologies. They were a frightened people and would not tolerate any departure from a traditional point of view.

Third, they were very concerned about the education of their children whom they believed were falling prey to the more liberal points of view that prevailed in some European countries, especially England and Holland. Their children saw the new Protestant ideologies as more open and willing to experiment with different behavioral patterns, and the Puritans believed that these more modern behaviors would bring down the wrath of God. They pointed to the Black Plague as an example of their belief that any departure from God's will would bring devastation.

They moved to Holland to get away from the more liberal theological way of life in England only to experience another liberal way of behaving, and they were certain that it was due to the influence that the new community was having on their children and their departure from biblical text. They wanted to move away again; this time to the new colonies, but many of their older children would not follow them and stayed behind in Holland. They were concerned that these "wayward" children would bring devastation to both Europe and to them in the new land, but they decided to move anyway. All of these factors formed the basis for their thinking and why they insisted on a strict theology to govern the new

campus at Harvard. The large number of deaths from disease in the New World added to their concerns and motivated them to believe that an angry Lord was punishing them for their failures and errors.

The powerful Mather family was behind the development of Puritanism at Harvard. The male leadership consisted of ministers who rigidly enforced Puritanical doctrines in the community and on the campus. Although almost all of them held high offices at the college, few rarely attended meetings or conferences. They issued mandates which the various presidents were required to follow absolutely.<sup>11</sup> They were absolute in their Puritan resolve. Their family descended from the Middle Ages, and they believed that God was absolute in his requirements as stated in the Old Testament. The Mathers went around Cambridge advocating a form of theological purity whereby they believed that people could not question anything in biblical text, and they were very strict disciplinarians who enforced an absolute adherence to biblical doctrine and a refusal to agree to any form of research or study that differed from what they believed. They controlled Harvard throughout most of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

In summation, this thesis has answered the question of why and how the Puritans became so powerful at Harvard. First, they were the original founders of the college. Second, the Puritan clergy became the core of the college and refused to relinquish power or consider any other point of view other than their own. They held a significant power role within the Cambridge community, and through a few strong Puritan families—especially the Mathers, they maintained that power in the college and enforced it rigorously upon the students, the faculty, and the administration. No one could become President of Harvard unless he had the approval of the Mathers and other powerful Puritan clerical families, who believed that God was absolute in his enforcement of the Old Testament and very punitive to those who disagreed or sought new answers to theological questions. The Mathers maintained a

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<sup>11</sup> Seymour Lipset and David Riesman. *Education and Politics at Harvard* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1975), Ch. 1.

reign of both control and fear, and very few opposed them. As a result, the Puritans became very powerful until the level of criticism against Puritanism and its severity became so strong and the Romantic movement started to permeate the Cambridge community and Harvard. The people found it very difficult to continue living with the level of strict and abusive discipline that the Puritans imposed.

### The Romantics and Unitarianism

With the coming of the Romantic Age to New England in the early part of the nineteenth century, the perception of God began to change. The Romantics, who at Harvard were the Unitarians, had just emerged from the Age of Enlightenment where God and science were interrelated. They believed that the Lord wanted people to do research work and find answers to deep theological questions that perplexed them. They also argued that there were multiple answers to questions related to God. Above all, the Romantics began to turn away from Puritan absolutism and the Old Testament to a more liberal perspective that considers and evaluates the New Testament and its emphasis on love and understanding. They became Utilitarian, and the two became synonymous. The harsh view of God began to move toward an emphasis on Jesus and His movement of kindness and understanding. The change was slow and took many years, but the power of the Mathers began to fail and the situation at Harvard began slowly to change.

The battle involved a conflict between the conservative ideology of the Puritans, who believed that the theology of the college had to be consistently subordinate to that of the Puritans. On the other hand, the Romantic Unitarians argued that there had to be a much greater freedom in exploring different theologies and church doctrines. They believed that God gave people a mind to explore knowledge and come to different conclusions, rather than to abuse it by absolutism. They argued that knowledge “was not a fixed doctrine,” (definition of Romanticism) but rather a search for truth. While



the Puritans saw this as a pathway to the devil, the new idealists, headed by Bronson Alcott, argued that the nature of the human mind required a different interpretation of theological values.

The industrial revolution improved living conditions for people and encouraged individual thinking.<sup>12</sup>The Romantic Age encouraged individual thinking about scientific issues and about God. The Lord now moved from being a taskmaster to a friend. Further, the Romantic Unitarians argued that people should return to nature and find the Lord in the various elements of nature rather than in the harsh discipline of Puritanism and the Old Testament. Harvard became the “religion of humanity”<sup>13</sup>

The Romantic Unitarians at Harvard were particularly drawn to the writing of William Wordsworth, who advocated a God of nature and deplored the excessive emphasis on rigid academia. He was a poet who sought truth through flowers, birds, and the clouds rather than a rigid view of the Old Testament. He envisioned God as being part of nature and one of love and compassion. The Romantics did not beat their children to instill knowledge, but instead encouraged them to find happiness in the various elements of nature. They believed that absolute knowledge was unattainable<sup>14</sup> This was a direct contradiction to the Puritans who argued consistently for theological absolutes. The Romantics argued that knowledge changes from age to age as new circumstances emerge, and as new situations become evident. Therefore, they believed that the search for knowledge would be a continuous one, and that the purpose of a college or university was to do that research in order to find truth. They argued that there would always be differences in individual perceptions of knowledge, and that research would help to identify meaning. However, they also recognized that scholarship was forever changing based on changes within the natural environment, and that would give the college the opportunity to continuously foster the search for truth. That truth, to them was evident in every field,

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<sup>12</sup> Mazour, p. 449.

<sup>13</sup> Marsden, p. 181.

<sup>14</sup> Williston Walker et. al. *A History of the Christian Church* (New York: Scribner, 1985), 628.

including theology and the human understanding of the nature of God. As people change and their behavior changes, their perception of God changes, and they look for different answers to universal questions. This explains why philosophies change from one age to another, and had a profound influence on Harvard.

The Romantic Unitarians of Harvard argued that “suffering was largely confined to the poor.”<sup>15</sup> The new Unitarian philosophy of Alcott argued that the reason for Puritanism was to maintain the power of the upper classes and control the poor. They believed that the Old Testament gave the upper classes the gateway to God, and that the Lord favored the political elite. Thus, Puritanism was more than just the absolute adherence to biblical text; it was also a system that favored the upper classes and limited the power of the Unitarian argued that God favored the poor and used Jesus as an example. They showed welfare. They did not believe that the upper class had the right to use theology to control the poor. In fact, they argued that the poor held a special place in the Lord’s heart, and that Harvard should give some degree of preference to the poor and the suffering in the establishment of its curricula and its teaching. This principle became foundational at Harvard. Throughout its history since the inculcation of the Romantic Age and the introduction of the Unitarians, Harvard has continuously made allowances for the poor and has recognized that those of the lower classes also make significant contributions to knowledge.

The Puritans believed that their fealty to God was the force that made them prosperous and enhanced the wealth of the college. On the other hand, the Romantics, and especially the Unitarians believed that their wealth came from their industriousness and their support. Some critics might object saying that Harvard is the wealthiest private school in the nation.<sup>16</sup> However, the Harvard administration believes that it is their moral responsibility to care for the poor. As a result, recent Presidents have

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<sup>15</sup> M.H. Abrams, *Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: Norton, 2008), 8.

<sup>16</sup> Harvard Archives.

started programs of free tuition for students whose family income was below a specified level, and they have even provided free room and board to attract students from less economically privileged backgrounds. Specifically, they believe that God wants them to reach out to students from a diversity of economic levels. For example, in 2000, Harvard announced a program whereby students whose family income was less than \$ 138,000 would have their tuition paid for, and those whose income was \$ 64,000 or less would also get free room and board. President Larry Summers believed that it was the moral responsibility of the University to provide an education for highly qualified students whose income was below a specified level. Ever since Harvard initiated the tuition assistance program as a reflection of God's will for the people, other private colleges such as Princeton, Stanford, Brown, and Yale have other comparable programs which they have indicated is a reflection of the new, more modern point of view concerning God's compassion toward all of the people.

While Harvard's critic can point to the fact of the University's wealth, much of its resources are used to help the students. The last President, Dr. Faust, indicated that no student who is admitted to Harvard will be denied an education because of inability to pay. She stated that it was God's will that we help the less fortunate, and reach out to all classes of people for assistance. Again, this is a significant departure from the Puritans, who identified wealth with fealty to God and goodness of human character.

The Romantics then turned to Unitarianism as a theological philosophy. The Unitarians are open to a diversity of theological points of view and toward looking at God from multiple perspectives. They encompass all different religions be they Christian or Jewish, and they believe it is the moral responsibility of contemporary scholarship to conduct research on a diversity of subjects related to theology. The Utilitarian perspective was emphasized by Harvard's greatest president, Charles Eliot, and has been a motivating force in the University's history. Professors of Theology and the department leader have come from a diversity of backgrounds. The last two were Dr. Peter Gomes, who led Harvard

Theology for 40 years and Jonathan Walton, both of whom were theologians who came from a liberal Baptist perspective.<sup>17</sup> While there are those who criticize the long-standing rule of the liberal Baptists at Harvard, it is also evident that Harvard has additional ministers from an Episcopal background and other Protestant faiths. The college wants to encourage a diversity of theological perspectives and a more diverse view concerning the nature of God. This is a radical departure from Puritanism, which wanted a single point of view. They believe that God is a Lord of “ups and downs” and encourages people to resolve their problems by looking at a diversity of theological perspectives.<sup>18</sup> The Puritans would have never accepted this perspective, as they saw God as a constant, an absolute, whereas circumstances were the result of individual behavior and contradictions to Old Testament biblical text.

The Unitarian concern for the welfare of the individual was paramount. They wanted to liberate every aspect of human life, including the search for God and the Lord’s meaning on earth. They rejected the Puritan absolutism and argued that the development of Harvard as a University depended upon the openness of theological beliefs. They recognized and respected a strict conformance to scholarship standards, but they refused to acknowledge that standards should be universally applied to everyone in the same manner. They argued for individuality of thought and a respect for the person’s right to design one’s own research projects and carry out the search for knowledge wherever it might lead. This philosophy was in absolute contradiction to that of the Puritans, who feared that the Unitarian perspective might lead students to challenge the will of God and fall prey to the devil. As such, the Puritans strongly opposed this point of view and believed that the University would fall apart if it prevailed. History has shown otherwise. Nonetheless, Unitarian individualism became a strong part of the Harvard curriculum and was equally applied to a respect toward a diversity of theological beliefs, for

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<sup>17</sup> Harvard Archives.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Gomes. *Doing What You Can*. (Cambridge, Harvard, 2003), 23-9.

all students and faculty. This change had significant long-range consequences for the history of both academia and the University.

The Unitarians, as well as the Romantics generally, had a preoccupation with illness and death. They lived in an era where there were many diseases and very few cures. However, unlike the Puritans before them, they did not believe that these events were punishments for human evils. Rather, the students at Harvard, along with the faculty, acknowledged the existence of these conditions as a fundamental aspect of life. While they suffered from their consequences, they were not overly pessimistic, and they did not believe that somehow they were the victim of an angry God, or that these illnesses were the work of the devil.

Instead, they sought research in order to find answers as to the causes and cures of these illnesses. They believed that the newly emerging science held the answers to their questions and concerns. They retreated to the laboratories of the college for experimentation, and they did not blame God for what was occurring. In this realm of knowledge, they were greatly different from their Puritan ancestors, who believed that God was the cause of these illnesses, and that they were plagues sent to punish people for their violation of Old Testament rules.

“At the dawn of the nineteenth century, with its rationalizing impulses both in orthodox and Deistic circles and its inclination to see in morality the essence of religion,”<sup>19</sup> the influence of the Unitarians began to be strengthened both at Harvard and the Cambridge community. They began to look at God differently, and see the Lord as one of kindness and fairness, rather than the symbol of tice and punishment. Ironically, many of the older, traditional Congregationalists, who previously favored the Puritan perspective “were in sympathy with the goals of the Unitarians” and favored them.<sup>20</sup> They

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<sup>19</sup> Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, 585.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 586.

argued that the Unitarians opened doors to understanding God from a new perspective and allowed human freedom—which they saw as part of the human condition—to become one with theological research.

To some of the traditional Puritans, the change to Unitarianism was difficult, because they were accustomed to a strong religious belief system based on fear. However, as the nineteenth century progressed, a great deal of this concern began to wane, and the people became more and more accustomed to looking at God through a new perspective. This did not mean there were no controversies. Even at Harvard there was an Old Guard that was frightened of the changing perspective. However, they were in the minority, and soon they retired, and the University became almost totally engulfed with the new way of thinking.

What were the advantages of the new Unitarianism over the old Puritan way of thinking? First, the Unitarians were not rigid or absolute, and they encouraged a diversity of behavior and thought with respect to God. It must not be assumed that they allowed people to just do as they pleased. They encouraged the students and faculty to do careful and scholarly research in order to find truth, and to allow that knowledge to permeate their behavior. They were concerned that their new philosophy could lead to chaos, if it were not properly implemented. On the other hand, they were more concerned with the rigidity of their Puritan ancestors, as well as the punishments that the people sustained for any criticism that they offered or any attempt to find new knowledge. They were very concerned with any form of knowledge that was absolute, and they rejected the use of harsh punishments to enforce the views of an elite clergy. They saw knowledge as something to be attained through careful research and analysis, not through force or abuse.

Second, unlike the Puritans, who believed that knowledge was unchanging, and that the rules of God were absolute and not subject to any form of analysis, the Unitarians argued that scholars had to

pursue knowledge from many different perspectives. They encouraged a diversity of research methodologies in order to attain information. However, they were equally concerned that this did not lead to chaos, and that scholarship was substantiated by some form of proof or analysis, especially with respect to theology. They were generally well-educated, and they expected that Harvard would adhere to some form of scholarly process that encouraged the search for truth.

The Unitarians came out of the Enlightenment, and this scientific movement had a profound effect upon their thinking. Their services and their research emphasized validation of the knowledge that students obtained. They objected strongly to the absolute, rigid method of thinking employed by the Puritans, but they also were concerned about any form of academic pursuit that was chaotic and could not be substantiated. On the other hand, the Puritans criticized them for allowing an almost complete departure from reliance on absolutes. They warned the Unitarians that the method of searching for an understanding of God would lead to such a level of intellectual carelessness that almost any idea would be accepted. They believed that the Lord would be angry because people—especially students—were departing from God’s ways and that the inevitable result would be some major consequence from God. When a viral pandemic occurred in 1869, the Puritans blamed the Unitarians for their conduct, and they warned that this disease was the result of violations of the Old Testament. They were very angry with the Unitarians for causing the deaths of so many people from illness, and they argued that the changing conditions within society are the result of human behavior. At Harvard, the students suffered a great deal from the pandemic, and many died from the disease that was sweeping New England. Yet, the Unitarians at the college believed that the disease was not a punishment from God, but some form of orderly process which occurred in the community when a microbe got out of hand.

Third, the Unitarians believed in the pursuit of knowledge wherever it may lead. However, the Puritans argued that this form of scholarship would not only lead to chaos but to extensive violations of God’s laws as reflected in the Old Testament. This perspective, which has led to considerable criticism in

both the nineteenth and twentieth century, has been used in an attempt to curtail research in many fields, especially theology. They warned the people that the evil events that occurred in the college community as well as in society were the result of this form of thinking.

Fourth, the Unitarians had a great respect for nature, which is the cornerstone for an understanding of God. According to them, God shows himself through natural occurrences and through the natural environment. As such, the people should spend a great deal of time in nature in order to gain a greater understanding of the Lord. The Unitarians believed that the natural environment teaches us a great deal about God, and it helps us to become more and more one with the Lord. However, the Puritans argued that the only major way of learning about God is through the Old Testament. They also pointed to the chaos that exists in nature with its storms, diseases, etc., and they warned that nature was not an accurate reflection of the Lord. They believed that the people could come to believe that God as nature, and they believed that this was wrongful thinking that would lead to disaster in human conduct. They strongly criticized the Unitarians and the Romantics for their excessive reliance on nature as a source of knowledge, and argued that the only source of true knowledge was the Old Testament. This was a major difference between the two perspectives, and it caused extensive arguments between them. The Romantics and the Unitarians believed that true knowledge came from nature, not from books, while the Puritans argued that nature was not consistent and would lead to chaos within the human world.

Finally, the Unitarians argued for a strong sense of individualism, whereas the Puritans argued against it as the key to chaos. They wanted everyone to behave in a comparable manner, and they stressed unity in human behavior. They believed that any form of individualism would lead to violations of biblical text and immoral behavior. They argued for a very strict set of rules governing every person in their daily conduct. They encouraged everyone to act in the same manner, rather than exert their own personality. They argued that human must behave similarly and in accordance with Old Testament rules



in order to avoid violations of religious law. They were absolute, whereas the Unitarians were flexible in both human conduct and the ability to do research.

#### CHARLES ELIOT AND THE UNITARIANS

Charles Eliot was the most prominent president of Harvard in the nineteenth century. He is considered by scholars to be the greatest of the Harvard reformer and one who took Unitarianism and Romanticism to its height.<sup>21</sup> Eliot came from a science background and brought to the presidency considerable skill in governing the University from a Unitarian perspective. He encouraged the pursuit of knowledge in every way possible, and he saw it as a vehicle for improving classroom instruction. He was also a very compassionate man who reached out to the students to encourage their scholarship and their health. When a student was ill, Dr. Eliot took care of him, because he believed that God expected every person to take care of each other. He refused to allow any form of severe discipline, while he

Encouraged the highest form of scholarship both for his students and faculty. He viewed this as a way of showing respect for God.

Eliot believed that the university should be a great teacher, a storehouse for truth. He stated:

First, Universities are teachers, store-houses, and researchers for truth. . . . In addition to these three distinct functions, a university has less direct but unifying social purposes. It should an example of religious toleration, and cultivate mutual respect between diverse churches.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> John T. Bethell. *Harvard Observed*. (Cambridge: Harvard, 1998), 13.

<sup>22</sup> Charles W, Eliot. "Letter to Edward C. Towne, August 2, 1895 in the Papers of Charles W. Eliot (Cambridge: Harvard University (Cambridge: Harvard Archives, 1895). Also Cited in Henry James. *Charles Eliot, V 2* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1930), 29.

Charles Eliot became President of Harvard in 1869, shortly after the end of the Civil War. He was caught between the new Unitarian philosophy and the old Puritan perspective that wanted a return to strict, biblical interpretation of biblical text. Those southerners who favored the Puritan point of view cited to the use of slavery in the Old Testament and argued that Harvard University was departing from the traditional way of operating and allowing complete freedom of thought. They wanted to encourage the administration to go back to the way of thinking that occurred prior to the Civil War. They believed that strict discipline and a singular point of view was essential for the development of the college. They identified slavery and a single church perspective as essential for carrying out the will of God. They were very angry over the willingness of the college to explore multiple perspectives with regard to research concerning God. They wanted a return to a more traditional point of view and pointed to the Middle Ages where great plagues occurred when individuals did not follow Old Testament perspectives exactly. They had a significant influence in the Old South, but at Harvard, they did not gain great support. Dr. Eliot argued that the college had a responsibility as a university to explore multiple perspectives, to consider the views of multiple churches, and to do research on theological subjects, as well as all other areas of study. The president adamantly held to this position despite criticism from a small but powerful group. Those who favored the Puritan perspective would not relent and brought the issue to the Board of Overseers, who promptly supported Eliot. They believed that the college had progressed significantly since the days of the Puritans, and they did not want to see a return to the old method of scholarship.

Charles Eliot wanted to foster Unitarian goals and set forth a procedure for accomplishing this task. Specifically, he wanted to accomplish all of the following.

First, he believed that "Harvard should become a great university on the model of the German universities."<sup>23</sup> This would give the college the opportunity to continue doing extensive research on all

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<sup>23</sup> Lipsett and Reisman, 89.

subjects. The German colleges of that era strongly believed in and encouraged considerable scholarship in all theological subjects. They argued that their purpose was not to challenge the will of God but to understand it. They believed that scholars in the field would use careful methodologies to search for new knowledge and understanding. They did not approve of the rigid absolutism of the Puritans but recognized that scholarship came up with new information and knowledge in each century and had to consider this information in the determination of its methodology. To Eliot, as a scientist, he strongly agreed with this position, because he saw the same occurring in science. He recognized that new research in the field led to a rejection of old positions and a consideration of new ones. He argued that the world of knowledge was very complex and not constant. Just as science determined new and unique answers in each generation of research, so must theology. The Puritan forces disagreed strongly, claiming that theological principles had to be constant and in conformance with the Old Testament, whereas science was changing based on new research. They believed that science changed because of new methodologies not new knowledge, and they argued that theology could not be analyzed in the same manner. Eliot disagreed, claiming that new research methodologies would help us understand the nature of God and the Lord's expectations for the universe. He believed that while the principles of religion might remain constant over a long period of time, the will of the Lord did not because it was interpreted by the believers of each era in accordance with their own thinking. Thus, research was essential in determining the true nature of God and the Lord's will for the universe and for Harvard College.

Second, he argued for the pursuit of science in the university.<sup>24</sup> He did not envision science as being in contrast to theology. He believed that science helped us to understand the universe that God created and our place in that world. For the era in which he lived, this position was controversial. However, the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Unitarians supported him completely in this perspective. He argued that science existed not to thwart or challenge the will of God, but to help us understand it. He saw science as a way of understanding our universe and explaining the principles that governed it. As a scientist, he came from a background that believed strongly in the research capability of science, in all fields, and he envisioned it as being essential for theology.

He pointed to the extensive changes that have occurred in theology since the early Middle Ages and showed that the beliefs concerning God or even the interpretation of the Old Testament have not remained consistent through the ages. While he recognized that they have changed slowly, they have changed, and the Puritans of his era did not interpret the text the same way in which Medievalists did so many years ago. He recognized that some theological principles had remained constant through the ages, many of them have changed. He attributed the changes to new generations of people and the method whereby they faced the situations that confronted them. He recognized that our understanding of the information that we work with changes consistently from one generation to another even when the data remains constant. Therefore, the interpretation of Old Testament text will change with each new generation, even if the specific wording of the text remains the same.

Third, he argued that “the university must expand the faculty in the social sciences”<sup>25</sup> in order to gain a greater understanding of theology and its impact on the college and the community. He believed that the various social sciences, especially history and government, help us to understand how and why people change their religious perspectives. He pointed to the changes from Judaism to Christianity and from the Catholic Church to the Protestants as evidence of his thinking. He indicated that many of these changes had more to do with the politics of the era than a careful analysis of theological principles. He did not necessarily pass judgment on the changes but showed that they were a reflection of social

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

conditions at the time. He then argued that what was needed was more research on these events and how they impacted theology.

The Puritans disagreed with him and argued that while social conditions changed within society, there were universal principles that had to remain constant and absolute through the generations. Otherwise, we would become victims of every changing political happening and beliefs concerning God would consistently change without a strong Old Testament base. They pointed to the administration of Henry VIII and how his concern for a male heir changed the entire theology of England. They argued that these changes had little to do with changing research on the nature of God or theology, but that it was the result of political and social conditions existent within society. They also pointed to the fact that Henry did not change the nature of the faith but instead took it out of the Pope's control and put it under his own leadership.

Fourth, he believed that students would gain a greater understanding of theological principles by expanding the elective system.<sup>26</sup> By opening the doors to a wide range of subjects, they would have the opportunity to analyze theological principles and come to their own conclusions concerning their validity. While the Unitarians strongly supported this proposal, the Puritans argued that this would lead to a form of intellectual chaos whereby all ideas would be treated as equal. This would cause knowledge to become chaotic and lead to a world in which there were little or few absolutes. The Puritans saw this as dangerous to the nature of man and to an understanding of God. There would not be any constants. Rather, each scholar would come to a conclusion, and these findings would be so diverse as to be meaningless. This concern for freedom of research has led to some issues that are even considered today, but the Unitarians argued that the interpretation of knowledge was constantly changing and had to be considered. Thus, the more that people had the opportunity to study and do research in a wide

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

range of fields, the more they could apply these principles to theological analysis. This consequence has in fact happened in the modern period, as theologians turn to history, sociology, and other fields for knowledge that impacts their own understanding of God.

Eliot was very concerned with the issue of absolute knowledge. He believed that the Puritan concern for religious absolutes was stifling and did not produce truth. He argued that Puritan leaders used their positions for political control and then justified them by theological arguments. In truth, he believed that their theological positions were more political and historical than theological. He saw them as being exemplifications of power rather than proof of knowledge.

He believed that the purpose of a university should “be the training of young men to be the training of young men to self- control and self -reliance through liberty.”<sup>27</sup> He argued that the ability to analyze the nature of God was part of human liberty and part of human life, and that to impose an authoritarian perspective on the students was one way of taking away their liberty. As such, he started a massive elective system at Harvard whereby students could study a wide range of courses that interested them.

As such, Eliot used his political position to bring about changes concerning the purpose of Harvard and other American colleges. Prior to his age, educational leaders had argued that the educational system should shape all human thought in a specific way in order to provide for the best education for young adults. However, he strongly objected, believing that the long-range consequences of this more Puritan point of view would be damaging to the individual and disastrous for society. He wanted to see a college where a diversity of thought and conduct led to a more active research process. He believed that his position applied as much to theology as to any other field. He believed that human abilities are given

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<sup>27</sup> An argument used frequently in his addresses. See Charles Eliot. *Charles Eliot. Educational Reform: Essays and Addresses* (New York: Oxford, 1898) 148.

by God to enable us to do research and scholarship, even about God. He argued that “all minds were not alike, either in degree of ability or, more important, in the nature of abilities.”<sup>28</sup> He argued that the diversity of abilities should enable each individual to do some form of research in order to gain knowledge that can be used to have an effective life, especially in the field of theology, which to him had a profound influence on human conduct. The Unitarian community at Harvard had a great respect for Dr. Eliot because he was willing to consider multiple points of view and change his position on theological issues when the evidence pointed to the necessity for change. At the same time, he was very strict on research methodology and emphasized the importance of scholarly conduct in research.

#### IMPACT ON THE CONTEMPORARY PERIOD

The twentieth century brought many changes to Harvard. However, each of the presidents maintained a strong Unitarian position and refused to bow to the interests of the Puritans. The first president, Lawrence Lowell changed Eliot’s elective system, but strongly believed in the necessity for research in all subject areas. He was a scholar and had no respect for mediocrity, but at the same time did not want the University to return to the classical system of the eighteenth century,

While he did believe in the objectivity of research and encouraged the scholarly pursuit of knowledge, he was also known for his bigotry against people of the Jewish faith. He questioned their ability to be objective and limited the number of their religious group to be admitted to Harvard. His prejudice created a great deal of criticism, especially in the Orthodox community who felt its impact the greatest. However, he maintained his position throughout his long presidency. When he finally resigned in 1933, and James Conant became president there was a great change in University policy. However,

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<sup>28</sup> Charles Eliot. *What Place Should Religion Have in a College*. Unpublished reply to McCosh, 1886). Elliott Papers at Harvard College, Archives.

the Lowell administration's prejudice brought severe criticism to the college because it lacked objectivity, and he was unable to provide significant evidence for his decision.

James Conant was a strong believer in theological research and scholarship in every field. He went beyond Eliot and argued that a professor must contribute to the national knowledge of his own field. He was the president who initiated at Harvard the "publish or perish system" that became the standard by which professors are judged for both tenure and promotion. His system appealed to the Unitarians but is controversial. Nonetheless, it has predominated consistently to this day as a key factor in scholarship. Almost all universities use this system as a basis for judging the quality of a professor, especially when considering the teacher for tenure or promotion to full professor.

Another major impact of the Unitarian system was to thwart the use of censorship in the publishing of research or knowledge. Lowell believed in this Unitarian position strongly and sought the support of the Harvard Crimson in this regard. The students strongly supported him, saying:

No censorship should be imposed upon thoughts or their utterance. If the University were to decree what the students or their professors should or should not say, then it would make itself responsible for any statement made by its members.<sup>29</sup>

This issue centered around a psychology professor who made comments in the quad about God and the war with Germany. A major organization pulled back a large donation because of it. However, Lowell argued that the professor was within his rights since he did not talk about these subjects as part of his class but within the college community. Puritan absolutism was not to govern Harvard, even when a considerable amount of money was involved.

The censorship issue had consequences throughout the nation as there was considerable discussion as to whether colleges should have the right to explore all positions on sensitive theological subjects. While Lowell admitted that he did not agree with the professor or some of his critics, he argued that

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<sup>29</sup> Harvard Crimson. "Freedom of Speech. *Harvard Graduation Magazine*. 23:364-5, December, 1914.



freedom of speech was a significant aspect of any college, and that any violation of it would lower the value of the university to the community and the nation. The Puritan element strongly disagreed claiming that censorship kept knowledge in conformance with the Old Testament and curtailed extremism, but both Eliot and his successors in the twentieth century disagreed. They feared the consequences of censorship to the production of knowledge in all fields, especially theology.

### SUMMARY

The purpose of this thesis was to consider the reasons for the shift from Puritanism to Unitarianism at Harvard, comparable to other ivy leagues. The thesis was that harsh and severe presentation of God not only destroys human morale but also the college itself. What I was out to prove was that the shift to Unitarianism and concern for the welfare of students is basically what saved Harvard and what provided the basis for the University that it is today. I gave significant evidence from Puritan history and the Puritan way of life to support my thesis, showing that during the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Puritan absolutism led to a significant loss of enrollment, once even closing the college, and caused students to refuse to continue their studies. The headmasters of this religious philosophy were heavily geared to their own interpretation of biblical text, primarily the Old Testament, and they enforced their belief with absolute rigidity. They beat the students for every error and even mistreated the teaching assistant who was there to help. The first headmaster was fired after the entire student body ran away from the college almost bringing the school to its end before it hardly began. The Puritans were not evil. Rather, they were victims of the suffering that they had sustained in Europe, and they developed their philosophy in response to what they had sustained. Further, they studied biblical text and came to the conclusion that God brought havoc to those who did not follow the rules exactly. They came to believe that natural occurrences were the result of the Lord's anger, which had to be placated in order to

provide for a better life. They also believed that human suffering was totally a consequence of biblical violations. They moved in Europe from place to place seeking refuge from those who disagreed with them, and they eventually came to the New World to seek the religious freedom to practice their ideology. However, they were extremely severe in every aspect of their life. They worked all the time and considered any form of play to be a violation of biblical law. They never allowed for more than one interpretation of biblical text and discouraged any form of research in any area, especially theology.

After nearly two centuries of Puritan rule, the effects of their absolutism severely inhibited the students and faculty at Harvard. With the coming of Romanticism and the Unitarianism that came with it, the students and faculty were attracted to the new ideology which emphasized nature, individualism, research and a consideration of multiple points of view about God. While there was considerable controversy at the beginning, the college quickly changed over to the new philosophy, even with the criticism of the Puritans who had controlled it for so long. The transition established the reality that excessive harshness and the portrayal of God as being so inflexible was the major factor in bringing about the change at Harvard. While the Puritans—a Protestant faith—were totally devoted to the Old Testament, the new Unitarians emphasized the New Testament and the role of Jesus in collegiate education.

The change from Puritanism to Unitarianism continued throughout the nineteenth century, largely under the influence of President Charles Eliot, and was a major factor in the development of the college. Without this transition, morale would have continued to fall, and the University would never have established the prestige that it now holds. Under Unitarianism, the college began an extensive process of research, especially in the area of theology, and now has an extensive faculty that it devoted toward the search for meaning with regard to the Lord. It has attracted some of the finest national scholars, amongst whom were Peter Gomes and Jonathan Walton. It has explored multiple positions concerning the role of God in the world. It currently emphasizes the significance of all Christian faiths, while it holds

to a Unitarian system of thinking that respects a wide diversity of beliefs and research. Its church is one of the most respected places of worship in Cambridge because it encourages freedom of thought and scholarship. There is still a very small Puritan contingency that criticizes these changes, but they have very little influence at the college.

### CONCLUSION

This thesis has accomplished its purpose in carefully and critically demonstrating the reasons for which Harvard changed from Puritanism to Unitarianism. It has also substantiated its thesis concerning the impact of theological absolutism on the morale of the students and faculty. It has shown that a college cannot survive believing in the rigid interpretation that the Puritans advocated. It has shown that a more accommodating perspective which allows for research and scholarship enhances the nature of the college and makes it a respectable place where learning takes place.

### Harvard Ode

Fair Harvard, we join in thy jubilee throng,  
And with blessings surrender thee o'er  
By these festival rites from the age that is past  
That has long kept their memory warm.  
O relic and type of our ancestor's worth,  
That has long kept their memory warm.  
First flow'er of their wilderness! Star of their night!  
Class rising through change and through storm!

Reverend Samuel Gilman (1811)

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