

The Puritans and Education
(compiled by David Herring for 7/10/03)

The end then of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, to be like him, as we may the nearest by possessing our souls of true vertue, which being united to the heavenly grace of faith makes up the highest perfection.

–John Milton, *Of Education*

The topic of the Puritans and Education intersects with many other Puritan subjects. Theology, philosophy, vocation/calling, ministry, preaching, family, and law are all factors, and it may be said that education is birthed out of all of these. The current inquiry will first survey the educational life of a Puritan raised child to adulthood, and then examine the higher education model of Harvard College in its educational/philosophical context.

Family Origins

There is no doubt that the educational life of a Puritan began in the home. In keeping with an ideal covenant household, the salvation of the children and their spiritual well being was at first place in the heart of every godly parent. They universally understood, as Milton illustrates above, that education was a means to that end. Therefore, they believed that the education of their children in religion was their premier duty. They would often imagine the horrors of what their children might say of them if they went to hell on account of their negligence in education:

They will follow thee up and down in that ever-burning lake with direful curses and hideous outcries, crying out continually, “Woe unto us, that ever we served such a wicked wretched master, that had no care of the salvation of our souls, took no course to save us out of these fiery torments!” Even thine own dear children, in this case, will yell in thine ears, world without end, “Woe and alas, that ever we were born of such accursed parents, who had not the grace to teach us betimes the ways of God, to keep us from our youthful vanities, and to train us up in the paths of godliness! Had they done so, we might have lived in the endless joys of heaven; whereas now we must lie irrecoverably in these everlasting flames. Oh! it was the fault of our own parents’ unconsionable and cruel negligence, that all our life long struck full deep in our souls, and hath now strangled them with everlasting horror.¹

Thus, they sought to catechize their children as soon as possible and instruct them in the Scriptures. This included daily devotions, either in the morning or around the dinner table, and sermon discussion/application.

Elementary Schools

Although parents sought to educate their children in Religion, they were less effective in

¹ Robert Bolton, *General Directions for a Comfortable Walking with God*, Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1995, (published earlier in London: F. Kyngston, 1625), p.276

teaching them to read. Because of “the great neglect of many parents and masters in training their children in learning and labor and other employments which may be profitable to the commonwealth,” the Massachusetts Bay Colony established an early law (1642) mandating the parental duty of teaching children to “read and understand the principles of religion and the capitall lawes of this country” (Massachusetts School Law; see p.19 in Selected Documents Section of Notebook). Apparently, this law was “not well observed” because it left this responsibility up the parents, and it gave way for the “Old Deluder, Satan, Act” (1647; see p.19 of Notebook Sources).² This gave towns of fifty families the responsibility of offering a free, public education so that children could learn to read. This is where the New England Primer and varieties of hornbooks would be used as tools. It is evident from early legislature and these tools that reading and the Scriptures were closely connected. It was also around this age, before the age of five, that girls started needlework. Girls were not educated beyond this point.

Grammar Schools

The purpose of grammar schools was to train boys for the university. If boys lacked ability in elementary school, they would work with their parents until or while they learned a trade. In grammar school, the subjects were English grammar, Latin, and Greek. Boys that could make it through would be in grammar school for about seven years. According to the exact accounts kept by the Boston Latin School (1712), the first three years were spent learning Latin “accidence” and works in Latin like *Aesop’s Fables*, the fourth year Erasmus’ *Colloguies*, Ovid *de Tristibus*, etc., the fifth year Cicero, more Erasmus and Ovid, the sixth year more Cicero and Ovid along with Lucius Florus and Virgil, and the seventh year Cicero, Justin, Isocrates, Homer, Virgil, Horace, Persius, and the Greek Testament. Every college hopeful was to master Latin because that was all that was spoken in the university classroom.

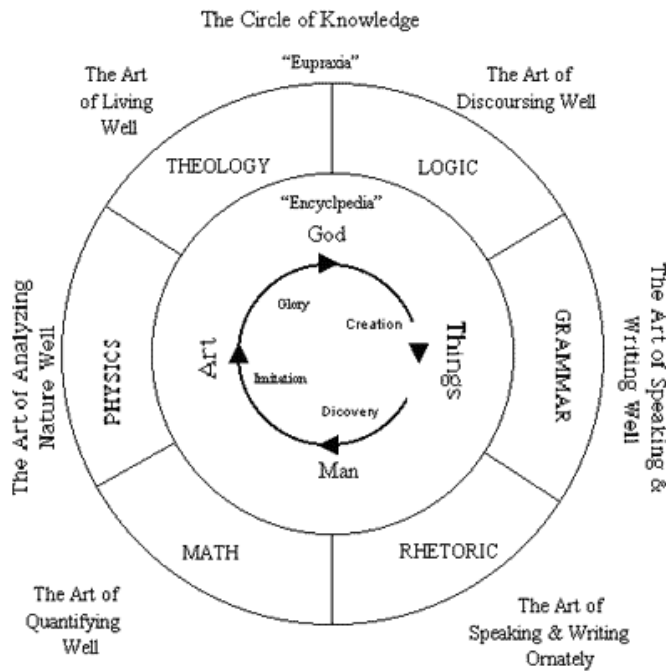
Higher Education at Harvard

Higher education was certainly the matrix of Puritan thinking. This is evidenced by the influence that William Perkins and William Ames had in their respective university posts. Concordantly, much thought was being spawned on the best Christian approach to scholarship in their time (1590’s-1630’s). The predominant notion among influential Puritan minds was that of educational “integration”. Works, such as Alexander Richardson’s *Rule of Encyclopedia*, John

² Earle E. Cairns, “The Puritan Philosophy of Education,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 104 (1947): 329

Alsted's *Encyclopedism*, Ames' *Technometry*, and John Comenius' *Pansophism* advocated an integrated "circle of knowledge" from which to view the world. Among their common

convictions was the use of logic as a means to truth, along with Scripture and Nature, setting them apart from their Reformation predecessors. Thus, given the Puritan movement toward *technologia*, the integration of a unified system of truth, and the emigration to the new world, it was inevitable that a school would be birthed in order to practice such integration; Harvard College. Although Harvard was modeled after Cambridge, as well as the University of Paris, it was unique in its curricular structure, in that



metaphysics was left out of the six "arts" (logic, grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, physics, and theology). This is because *technologia* took the place of metaphysics, fulfilling the "roles normally assigned to metaphysics of defining ontology, epistemology, cosmology, and anthropology".³ Such commitment to educational integration is evidenced by the motto on the seal of Harvard, *Veritas*, "Truth," which is inscribed over three books, representing nature, Scripture, and logic as the three "books of truth". Admission to Harvard consisted of an interview with the president, with no applications to fill out or essays to write. Normally he would flip to a passage in the Greek New Testament, expecting a translation of the chosen passage and an exegesis. He would also do the same for some work in Latin, and would also test the mathematic skills of the prospective student. According the *New England First Fruits* (1643), which has a section, "In Respect of the College, and the Proceedings of Learning Therein," the times and subjects of learning for matriculated students were as follows:

The second and third day of the week, read Lectures, as follows.
To the first year at 8 o'clock in the morning *Logic*, the first three quarters,
Physics the last quarter.

³ David Hill Scott, "A Vision of *Veritas*: What Christian Scholarship Can Learn from the Puritan's 'Technology' of Integrating Truth." <http://ai.clm.org/aip/docs/scott.html>. The above graphic was taken from Scott also.

To the second year, at the 9th hour, *Ethics* and *Politics*, at convenient distances of time.

To the third year at the 10th. *Arithmetic* and *Geometry*, the three first quarters, *Astronomy* the last.

Afternoon.

The first year disputes at the second hour.

The 2nd year at the 3rd hour.

The 3rd year at the 4th every one in his Art.

The 4th day reads Greek.

To the first year the *Etymology* and *Syntax* at the eighth hour.

to the 2nd at the 9th hour, *Prosodia* and *Dialects*.

Afternoon.

The first year at 2nd hour practice the precepts of *Grammar* in such authors as have variety of words.

The 2nd year at 3rd hour practice in *Poesy*, [with] *Nonnus*, *Duport*, or the like.

The 3rd year perfect their *Theory* before noon, and exercise *Style*, *Composition*, *Imitation*, *Epitome*, both in Prose and Verse, afternoon.

The fifth day reads Hebrew, and the Eastern Tongues.

Grammar to the first year hour the 8th.

To the 2nd *Chaldee* [Aramaic] at the 9th hour.

To the 3rd *Syriac* at the 10th hour.

Afternoon.

The first year practice in the Bible at the 2nd hour.

The 2nd in *Ezra* and *Daniel* at the 3rd hour.

The 3rd at the 4th hour in *Trostius* New Testament.

The 6th day reads Rhetoric to all at the 8th hour.

Declarations at the 9th. So ordered that every Scholar may declaim once a month. The rest of the day *vacat Rhetoricis studiis*. *The 7th day reads Divinity Catecheticall at the 8th hour, Common places at the 9th hour.*

Afternoon.

The first hour reads history in the Winter,

The nature of plants in the Summer,

The sum of every Lecture shall be examined, before the new Lecture read.

Each student was expected to be able to read the Hebrew Bible and Greek New Testament into Latin and “resolve them logically” and be “of godly life and conversation” in order to graduate.

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