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**The Paradox of**

**Early American Protestantism**

The Progenitor of an Intellectual

and Anti-Intellectual American Heritage

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S ANY CASUAL OBSERVER OF THE 2008 PRESIDENTIAL RACE would agree, the American characterization of what constitutes a capable leader couldn’t be more polarized. While one half the country favored a Harvard educated constitutional lawyer, the other supported a self-proclaimed “hockey mom” whose qualifications included her straight-talking, folksy insight and good Christian spirit. But the force at work here may go deeper than just a difference of opinion among voters. In fact, one could venture to say the election merely punctuated a real and often dismissed ideological divide that separates Americans into two factions: the intellectual and the anti-intellectual. Since the latter half of the twentieth century, historians have begun theorizing the derivation of this intellectual dichotomy. Most notably, in his hallmark book *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, the esteemed historian Richard Hofstadter concluded that because “the American mind was shaped in the mold of early modern Protestantism . . . religion was the first arena for American intellectual life, and thus the first arena for an anti-intellectual impulse” (55). He identifies the religious Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, as well as the evangelist tradition it generated, as the point at which many Americans started to forgo pursuing communion with God through liturgical study and began to favor recitation of his Scriptures, a connection with the Holy Spirit, and communal prayer. This turn, for Hofstadter, is in large part the starting point for American anti-intellectualism. He suggests that this turn nearly three centuries ago allowed our contemporary, self-educated Joe-the-plumber American to spring forward at political rallies today. In other words, Hofstadter locates the origin of American anti-intellectualism in the nation’s Protestant Christian roots. He in turn sources our modern intellectualism to the scientific revolution and the European enlightenment, both of which lay outside the walls of the church’s dominion.

There is, however, a piece of this picture that Hofstadter glosses and casually ignores as a consequence. He himself states, in passing, that “it is doubtful that any community ever had more faith in the value of learning and intellect than Massachusetts Bay” (59). Their seminary, Harvard University, is today considered to be the most esteemed institution of secular academia in the world; and yet, Hofstadter identifies the early American Protestants who founded the college as the same ideological sires of modern anti-intellectualism. Needless to say, this realization that early American Christendom was the progenitor of America’s intellectual and anti-intellectual heritages suggests a need to revise Hofstadter’s theory and to reanalyze the intellectual nature of early American Protestantism. This essay strives to accomplish just that, and it comes to a conclusion quite contrary to Hofstadter’s. Namely, it asserts that contemporary secular intellectualism is the product of, and religious anti-intellectualism the response to, an early American Protestantism that became too scholastic for its own good. Harvard and the other original seminaries that intended to train a ministry capable of creating a “city upon a hill” instead spawned a clergy too introspective and inquisitive to stay confined to the Bible and gave rise to a congregation too overwhelmed and alienated by the erudition of its preachers to stay intellectual. Harvard’s history, in this sense, provides an ideal model through which Hofstadter’s theory can be tested.

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o eliminate a potential misconception from the start, this is not an essay about the origin of “stupidity” and “intelligence” in America. Such an American dichotomy may indeed exist, and may even overlap with both ends of the spectrum of what is being discussed, but it is not the driving factor for what distinguishes these two camps. Intellectualism and anti-intellectualism denote, rather, aaaa much subtler difference – a difference that resides, Hofstadter astutely suggests, in a nuance of their use of intelligence. “Intelligence,” he writes, “is an excellence of mind that is employed within a fairly narrow, immediate, and predictable range; it . . . works within the framework of limited but clearly stated goals, and may be quick to shear away questions of thought that do not seem to help in reaching them” (25). In other words, intelligence as an entity confines itself to the pragmatic, accepts a known body of knowledge, and uses it. For example, both the carpenter who learns to adeptly construct a building and the doctor who trains to identify pathology and treat patients fall neatly into this category. Intellect, on the other hand, is a slight modification of this intelligence, and Hofstadter describes it as “the critical, creative, and contemplative side of mind . . . [that] examines, ponders, wonders, theorizes, criticizes, imagines” (25). Simply put, the intellectual challenges what is known, probes what is unknown, and tries to further the body of knowledge that is accessible to the intelligent. Such is the penchant of the inventor who takes apart a tractor and adds his own improving touches, and such is the scholar who disassembles an accepted theory of quantum mechanics to see if his observations agree. It should be recognized, therefore, that anti-intellectualism is by no means equivalent to anti-intelligence. As Hofstadter suggests, anti-intellectuals still strive to be functioning members of their societies, to use what they know, and to understand what they see. They only differ from the intellectual in that they do not question objectively what they take to be correct. It is for this reason that they can live unfazed by unsubstantiated religious dogma and why the intellectual often cannot. Thus, in light of this distinction, it becomes evident why the concept of an “intellectual religion” embodies a walking contradiction, and this realization will be important to understand why early American Protestantism, from its conception, was doomed to fractioning off into the intellectual and anti-intellectual heritages that it did.

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quick perusal of American Protestant history and early culture provides some background to this end. Early American Protestantism arose from disillusionment with the dogma of the Anglican Church whose clerical leaders, they felt, force-fed its congregants what to believe and how to pray. Convinced that this was a bastardized form of the faith, the Protestant fathers set out for the New World in the 1620’s to pursue what historian Hugh Helco describes as “a knowledge of the Bible in its true sense and original meaning, unclouded by the commentaries and ‘false glosses of saint-seeming deceivers’” (11). It was an ideology that held the individual responsible for finding his or her own connection with God via close reading and interpretation of the Bible, not one predetermined by an elite class of bishops. Aside from religious observations, all domestic and logistic affairs of settlement were also to be directed by the lessons of the original Scriptures. Thus, to create a clergy equipped to interpret the Bible and arbitrate a holy settlement, these early American Christians immediately set about constructing “a seminary for the knowledge of God,” otherwise known as Harvard College (Mather 138). Yet from its inception, aside from conducting classical liturgical studies, the school also educated its ministers in philosophy, history, poetry, and Hebrew with the notion that a worldly knowledgebase would render the American clergy better equipped to navigate the ecclesiastic domain (Tyler 99). But the application of this knowledge was strictly limited. For no other reason than to better understand God were these missionaries-in-training to pursue this secular learning. So stringent was this corollary that historian Moses Coit Tyler later commented that the early Protestants ministry could “not attempt to combine the sacred and the secular; they simply abolished the secular, and left only the sacred” (101).[[1]](#endnote-1) Nevertheless, the damage had already been done. Empowering the preacher to question the Bible, to dissect it, make it his own, and become intellectual had made him fundamentally a “non-believer.” Acceptance of the Bible was no longer enough. He now needed substantiating evidence for the conclusions he drew, and this pursuit of answers ultimately drove him beyond the domain of religion.

The first hint of secularism penetrating the thick walls of Protestant theology came soon after the construction of Harvard College in the form of an unnoticed, seemingly innocuous concession to the subject matter of sermons. Contrary to the original Protestant ideology that viewed the Bible as the reference book for all inquiries, it appears the first generation of Harvard clergymen began turning towards life experiences and the natural world to reveal a deeper understanding of God. Tyler comments that university preachers began searching “for a precise providential meaning in every small incident in their lives,” such that it became the “mark of a holy and wise man to be able to solve various pantomimic riddles with which God was all the time trying to communicate his thoughts” (102). Yet, contrary to Hofstadter’s conclusion that this secular thinking was only a transient phase of the church, the church was beginning to move in the opposite direction. Hofstadter even mentions offhandedly that after the first few decades of Harvard’s establishment, the university was already losing more than half of its ministers-in-training to the captivating secular ideas to which they were being exposed (60). So egregiously was the school producing fewer ministers that to appease the older orthodoxy (and to exonerate his father who was president of Harvard at the time), Rev. Cotton Mather conciliatorily wrote in his *History of Harvard College*, “[Harvard has] supplied the government, the church, the senate, [and] the army, with accomplished men, who are better qualified to serve the public interest in proportion to the superiority of their acquirements” (138). However, it did not escape notice that the church appeared second on this list, not first. It would seem that those still entering the ministry began pursuing a semantic interpretation of the Bible that was so heady and spiritually lackluster that by the 1730s George Whitefield would say, in reference to an observed loss of religious vigor in the colonies, that “the reason why Congregations have been so dead is because dead Men preach to them” (qtd. in Hofstadter 65). Contrary to Hofstadter’s assertion that this original Protestantism transformed directly into a tradition that would become anti-intellectual evangelicalism, the church was falling off the map of religiosity altogether, and landing in a realm of intellectualism beyond the ecclesiasticism from which it originated. In the wake of this intellectual ascendancy, there remained a gap in the religious hierarchy. It is here that the laymen preacher gained footing to establish an anti-intellectual faith that would save the American church.

In describing the evolution of this new anti-intellectual religion, Hofstadter’s book is likely unmatched in its comprehensiveness. Hofstadter states, “Churches withdrew from intellectual encounters with the secular world, gave up the idea that religion is a part of the whole life of intellectual experience, and often abandoned the field of rational studies on the assumption that they were the natural province of science alone” (86-87). In sum, “[s]imple dogmatic formulations were considered sufficient” (Hofstadter 86). In light of the earlier distinction between intellectualism and anti-intellectualism, this makes sense. To follow a doctrine that cannot be substantiated, a faith-based religion needs believers that do not ask questions. It needs anti-intellectuals. It is this religious anti-intellectualism that has established the kind of secular anti-intellectual heritage one sees in America today. One only needs to look at the contemporary controversy surrounding such issues as global warming and evolution to find evidence of this. Because the Bible does not make specific reference to the possibility of massive climate shifts or explicitly state that a microbe can evolve into a human, the American anti-intellectual is begrudging if not unwilling to accept the intellectual’s assertion that indeed it can. However, what is lacking in Hofstadter’s text is an account of how this anti-intellectualism, which came to envelop much of American Christendom, has influenced the remaining pockets of clerical intellectualism still nestled within the original seminaries. His text does not acknowledge that it was the birth of this anti-intellectualist movement that alienated Harvard and other universities from their religious affiliations in the first place, and that forced them down a path to what would become modern secular intellectualism.

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arvard’s history provides an ideal window into the past to evidence the impact of anti-intellectualism on the evolution of secular thinking. In a pivotal turning point in the history of the American university, George Whitefield, the poster-priest of the Great Awakening, publicly stated in his 1741 nationally read *Journal* that “as for the Universities, I believe, it may be said, their Light is now become Darkness, Darkness that may be felt, and is complained of by the most godly Ministers” (qtd. in Smith 329). In one fell swoop, lay-Christianity all but excommunicated the university clergy from the folds of American Christendom, usurped their preeminence in the eyes of the populous, and elevated its own non-collegiate orators into the guise of a *godly* ministry. In a famous fifteen-page pamphlet published in response to Whitefield’s derision, Harvard University returned the favor, openly discrediting Whitefield as “a Deluder of the People” and effectively washed its hands of directing the future of American Christendom.[[2]](#endnote-2) Within a decade, under the direction of university president Edward Holyoke, Harvard’s curriculum for the sciences and humanities underwent a rapid modernization, including establishing the school’s first experimental-physics laboratory and a restructuring of the standing faculty to incorporate a wider breadth of professorships in the secular fields (Harvard University). Moreover, what originally existed as a curriculum pervaded by theology was remodeled to officially consign religion to a new Department of Divinity, a change that shifted the school’s focus from producing clergyman to providing, as a latter student would observe, “a place where religion can be investigated dispassionately and freely, whether or not one plans to enter the Parish ministry as a profession” (Stewart 2).[[3]](#endnote-3) Put another way, religion was more or less now a subject to be studied in the classroom, not an all-encompassing dogma to restrain the academic’s view of the world.

Yet some might argue that it is an egregious adulteration of the university’s history to imagine that Harvard’s faculty immediately dispensed with its clerical robes and put on the mortarboards of academia. To an extent, they would be right. Harvard’s presidency was still filled by a practicing minister until the appointment in 1829 of Josiah Quincy, a lawyer and member of the House of Representatives, but even Quincy repeatedly asserts throughout his *The History of Harvard University* that the school continued to instill in its students devout Christian morals and respect for religion. In fact, it wasn’t until 1886 that Harvard President Charles Eliot abolished the school’s requirement for its students to attend daily chapel services (Harvard University). Therefore, one might feel justified in contending that Harvard University had not left the realm of Christianity until the close of the nineteenth century.

However, while the university in name may have been slow to disassociate itself from its Protestant past, deeper analysis reveals it practiced a form of Christianity that differed greatly from the anti-intellectual strain being propagated beyond its brick walls. In his book *Three Centuries of Harvard*, historian Samuel Morison points his reader to university president Rev. Joseph Willard (1781-1804) as an exemplification of this difference. An ordained pastor, Willard also conducted a series of astronomical experiments about which he published a paper in 1783 that was well received by the greater scientific community.[[4]](#endnote-4) In reference to this example, Morison remarks, “Clerical interest in science may astonish those brought up on the ‘warfare between Science and Theology’ thesis; but it has always been common among Harvard-trained parsons” (166). Morison also comments that under the direction of President Rev. John Kirkland (1810-1828), a man respected throughout the university for his religious liberalism, the demographic of the student body would dramatically shift beyond its sectarian roots to include members of all Christian denominations and even Jews (198). After the Civil War and the advent of the Industrial Revolution, this eclipsing of religious tradition with secular academia hastened to usher in a university “religion” that, by the school’s tercentenary anniversary, Rev. Frederick Griffin would define as entirely academic in all but name. “If we ask what does Harvard prize most,” writes Griffin, “the answer will be in terms of religious values such as scholarship which implies faith in the inner potential resources of man” (1151-1152). But he is quick to conclude “religion at Harvard has no special privileges” (1152).[[5]](#endnote-5) In other words, by the opening of the twentieth century, all that was left of the ecclesiastic intellectualism that sired Harvard University and its secular academia was its intellectual values – namely, its desire for learning and the concept of personal fulfillment through study.

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hus, in light of this journey into the origins of American theology and secular academia, one can begin to uncover a clear progression of how early Protestant ideology evolved into both the contemporary intellectualism and anti-intellectualism one sees in America today. Condemned from its conception with the belief that the Bible could be intellectually understood, early Protestantism dissolved within the first hundred years of its establishment into an evangelical, anti-intellectual tradition and a nascent form of secular academia that was beginning to take shape in the church’s original seminaries. As a defense mechanism to save American Christendom from the intellectualism that had almost killed it, the evangelist quickly severed his ties to his seminary brethren, which in turn pushed the university intellectual closer towards abandoning his religious roots. Hence, we return to the present, and one can begin to appreciate how the vestiges of this history continue to resurface within the American landscape.

Of course, it is an unreasonable oversimplification of the many complex forces that have molded our history to target Protestant theology as the sole cause that fathered our modern intellectual and anti-intellectual traditions. However, when Sarah Palin raises a cheer with the statement, “We need a commander and chief not a constitutional law professor lecturing us from a lectern,”[[6]](#endnote-6) it is important to recognize that she is not just riding a wave of contemporary anti-intellectual propaganda; rather, she is tapping into an ideological contention that took root some 270 years ago. And when a modern intellectual such as Hofstadter points at arm’s length to American anti-intellectualism as the product of early American Christendom, he need only look back upon his own ideological genealogy to find that he himself is a descendent of this same common ancestor; the modern intellectual, in other words, finds roots in that same ideological contention. What is the impact of this paradox? Are the American intellectual and anti-intellectual effectively congenital twins? The answer to these questions is beyond the scope of this paper, but one fundamental ramification is strikingly evident: namely, intellectual and anti-intellectual Americans are not as fundamentally different as they make themselves out to be. If we had a better understanding of our own intellectual history, perhaps both sides could better appreciate this ideological connectivity. We may even be able to relate to each other’s perspectives. Needless to say, this revised understanding of America’s intellectual history has the potential to begin dislodging an obstacle that has too long prevented intelligent Americans, both secular and religious, from productively cooperating and opening up a new era of American history in which they might interact synergistically.

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**End Notes**

1. Information from Moses Coit Tyler’s *A History of American Literature*. Tyler was originally cited in Hofstadter’s book, and it was Hofstadter’s text that originally led me to explore Tyler’s work. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This quote was taken from “The Testimony of the President, Professors, Tutors and Hebrew Instructor of Harvard College in Cambridge Against the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, And his Conduct”; reprinted in *American Christianity: Interpretation and Documents 1607-1820,* page 330-5. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. This quote is from a Harvard student publication in 1953 that reflected on how the school’s religious focus had diminished early on in its history. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “A Method of finding the Altitude and Longitude of the Nonagesimal Degree of the Ecliptic”; published in 1783 in a larger work entitled Philosophical Memoirs Part I: Astronomical and Mathematical Papers. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. “Christo et Ecclesiae – Harvard Religion”; delivered by Harvard Divinity School professor Rev. Frederick R. Griffin, S.T.B. ’01 on Visitation Day of the Harvard Divinity School, April 21, 1936 and reprinted in the Harvard Alumni Bulletin. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Delivered at Sarah Palin’s “Tea Party Rally” in Nevada, March 28, 2010. Recorded by Fox News and posted on *democalypseNOW.com*. The entire quotation is as follows: “In these volatile times when we are a nation at war now more than ever is when we need a commander and chief not a constitutional law professor lecturing us from a lectern.” [↑](#endnote-ref-6)