



Written by [Sam Blumenfeld](#) on October 18, 2012

## Religion in Early American Education

The reason early Americans became the most literate people on earth is because of their profound dependence on the principles and laws of the Bible as their guide for building a godly civilization in the North American wilderness. The Pilgrims, also known as Puritan separatists, had emigrated from England to Holland in the desire to be able to practice their religion without persecution. Nathaniel Morton, who wrote the first history of the New England settlement in 1669, narrated how all of this came about:



In the year 1602, divers godly Christians of our English nation, in the North of England, being studious of reformation, and therefore not only witnessing against human inventions, and additions in the worship of God, but minding most the positive and practical part of divine institutions, they entered into covenant to walk with God, and one with another, in the enjoyment of the ordinances of God. But finding by experience they could not peaceably enjoy their own liberty in their native country, without offence to others that were differently minded; they took up thoughts of removing themselves and their families into the Netherlands.

In 1610 they left England and settled in Leyden (also spelled Leiden), where they were “lovingly respected” by the Dutch. Despite their comfort and acceptance by the Dutch, “they took up thoughts of removing themselves into America.... They foresaw that Holland would be no place for their church and posterity to continue.” Their children would eventually speak Dutch instead of English and follow the “great licentiousness of youth in that country.” And an even greater motivation was:

a great hope and inward zeal they had of laying some good foundation, or at least to make some way thereunto, for the propagating and advancement of the gospel of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world, yea, although they should be but as stepping stones unto others for the performance of so great a work.

And so, after 10 years in Holland, they embarked on that fateful voyage on the Mayflower which was to change the world’s history. Before their departure, their pastor, John Robinson, who remained in Holland, addressed a letter to the Pilgrims in which he said:

Whereas you are to become a body politic, using amongst yourselves civil government, and are not furnished with special eminency above the rest, to be chosen by you into office of Government; let your wisdom and godliness appear not only in choosing such persons as do entirely love, and will promote the common good; but also in yielding unto them all due honour and obedience in their lawful administrations, not beholding in them the ordinariness of their persons, but God’s ordinance for your good; not being like the foolish multitude, who more honour the gay coat, than either the virtuous mind of the man, or the glorious ordinance of the Lord.

In the new world, the Puritan separatists would be not only a religious community but also a political entity, an entirely new set of circumstances for these evangelists.



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The Pilgrims set sail from Southampton, England, on the 5th of August, 1620. Actually, they started out with two ships, but the smaller ship developed a leak, and so it was decided to proceed with the larger ship, the Mayflower, on the transatlantic crossing. After a stormy voyage they finally landed on what was then known as Cape Cod. Morton writes:

Thus they arrived at Cape Cod, alias Cape James, in November, 1620, and being brought safe to land, they fell upon their knees, and blessed the God of heaven, who had brought them over the vast and furious ocean, and delivered them from many perils and miseries.

It was then that they entered into a solemn combination, as a body politic, and wrote by general consent the famous Mayflower Compact, which spelled out the form of government they would have. It was as much a religious document as it was a civil one. It was signed on November 11, 1620, by 41 male members of the community. It said in part:

Having undertaken for the glory of God, and advancement of the Christian faith, and the honour of our King and country, a voyage to plant the first colony in the northern parts of Virginia; do by these presents solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God and one another, covenant and combine ourselves together into a civil body politic, for our better ordering and preservation, and furtherance of the ends aforesaid.

Thus, the Compact established a Christian government in the North American wilderness as a religious act based on biblical law. Since they were all of one Christian community there was no concept of a separation of church and state. It was only when other contentious Christian denominations settled in North America that the idea of a separation of civil government from total control of a particular Christian denomination began to be expressed. It wasn't until 1789 that the separation idea was translated in our national Constitution as freedom of religion for all.

Of course, all education in the early days of New England had to be religion-based. Children were taught to read more for religious reasons than secular ones. Everyone had to be able to read the Bible. Children were named after biblical personages. The calendar governed social and cultural life through the observance of the Sabbath and religious holidays.

In 1642, the first education law was enacted by the General Court, the Massachusetts Bay Colony legislature, which summed up the colonists' concern:

Forasmuch as the good education of children is of singular behoof and benefit to any commonwealth and whereas many parents and masters are too indulgent and negligent of their duty in this kind:

It is therefore ordered by this Court and the authority thereof, That the selectmen of every town, in the several precincts and quarters where they dwell, shall have a vigilant eye over their brethren and neighbors, to see, first that none of them shall suffer so much barbarism in any of their families, as not to endeavor to teach, by themselves or others, their children and apprentices as much learning as may enable them perfectly to read the English tongue, and knowledge of the capital laws, upon penalty of twenty shillings for each neglect therein.

Parents were also ordered to catechize their children in the principles of the Christian religion once a week. Church discipline was part of Calvinist doctrine, which is why the selectmen were expected to know how parents were educating their children.

In 1647, the first school law in the colonies was enacted. Its famous first line is often quoted in histories



of American education:

It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep man from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times, keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these latter times, by persuading from the use of tongues, so that at least the true sense and meaning of the original might be clouded and corrupted with false glosses of deceivers, and to the end that learning may not be buried in the grave of our forefathers, in church and commonwealth, the Lord assisting our endeavors:

It is therefore ordered by this Court and authority thereof, That every township within this jurisdiction, after the Lord hath increased them to the number of fifty householders, shall then forthwith appoint one within their town to teach all such children as shall resort to him, to write and read, whose wages shall be paid, either by the parents or masters of such children or by the inhabitants in general, by way of supply....

And it is further ordered, That where any town shall increase to the number of one hundred families or householders, they shall set up a grammar school, the masters thereof being able to instruct youths so far as they may be fitted for the university....

Harvard had been founded in 1636 with a grant from the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a training ground for Calvinist ministers. Thus, grammar schools were needed to provide Harvard with well-prepared students. It should be noted that many of the leaders in the colony had been educated at Oxford and Cambridge in mother England, and therefore had high standards for the new education institutions of the colony.

Thus, the Bible-based commonwealth considered education to be the most important means of providing future generations with cultural and religious institutions that would preserve and advance Christian civilization. In this respect they were successful for a century. Indeed, the Calvinist style of Christianity dominated New England, until a more liberal form of Christianity evolved into full-fledged Unitarianism. By 1805, Harvard had not only become the stronghold of Unitarianism, it had also become the chief source of American anti-Calvinism.

While the Harvard elite had gone the way of heresy, the vast majority of American colonists were conservative in their faith and educated their children in the Calvinist religion. The *New England Primer*, which appeared in the 1690s, catechized children in Calvinist precepts. This was obvious in the teaching of the alphabet. For example, for A: "In Adam's Fall We sinned all. For B: "Heaven to find, The Bible mind. C: "Christ crucify'd For sinners dy'd. D: "The Deluge drown'd The Earth around" E: "Elijah hid By Ravens fed." H: "My Book and Heart Must never part." M: "Moses was he Who Israel's Host Led thru' the Sea." Q: "Queen Esther sues And saves the Jews." Thus fundamental Christian principles, through dramatic Bible stories, were inculcated as early as possible.

Among the earliest of American educators was Noah Webster, a devout Christian, born in 1758 in West Hartford, Connecticut. He was a student at Yale during the years of the Revolutionary War. His little *Blue-Backed Speller*, first published in 1783, taught millions of young Americans to read. By 1820, the number of copies sold throughout the United States was about 20 million. All it took was one man with one little book, and a host of imitators, that turned America into the most literate nation on earth.

After the Revolution there was a great expansion of textbook publishing. Schooling and literacy had created a sizable market for books, and Webster took advantage of the need by writing *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*. It sold well.



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As a patriot, Webster was imbued with the need for Americans to develop their own version of the English language. He advocated spelling reform, but wound up with very few spellings changed from British English. By 1800, at the age of 42, he realized that his true calling was lexicography, which led to the compiling of his great *Dictionary of the American Language*. The finished book was finally published in November 1828. John S. Morgan, in his biography of Webster, writes:

Except for its German-cast type, it was totally an American enterprise.... His preface bristled with such nationalistic statements as “our country has produced some of the best models of composition ... equaled only by that of the best British authors, and surpassed by that of no English compositions of a similar kind.” Despite these remarks, it sold better in England than the United States.

Webster, who had become a Congregationalist in his later years, saw the faculty of language as a gift from God and his dictionary as the culmination of godly labor. Today, his dictionary has been revised to suit modern language usage. The original 1828 edition has become a valuable collector’s treasure, with its definitions based on biblical values. It is very much worth having in any intelligent man’s library.



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