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**“I Spake the Truth in the Feare of God”;  
The Puritan Management of Dissent During the  
Henry Dunster Controversy**

**By**

**Timothy L. Wood**

“All Protestantism,” remarked the noted British statesman Sir Edmund Burke in 1775,

is a sort of dissent. But the religion most prevalent in our northern colonies is a refinement on the principle of resistance; it is the dissidence of dissent, and the protestantism of the Protestant religion.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly a century and a half after its founding, Burke correctly identified dissent as one of the cornerstones of the New England tradition. Indeed, many a settler crossed the Atlantic during the Great Migration because of the creeping spiritual deterioration and ecclesiastical corruption that they believed they detected in England. Channeling their energies into designing a society that would better correspond to the revealed word of God, the founders of New England sought to build a Bible commonwealth that would stand as a monument to their protest.

No sooner had the leaders of the Massachusetts Bay Company set foot in America than they experienced a jolting reversal of roles. Lifelong dissenters now found themselves charged with maintaining

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Burke, “Speech on Conciliation with America”, [March 22, 1775] excerpted in *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1979), 109.

order and enforcing conformity. In fact, as one dissident after another squared off against the colony's religious and political establishment, the management of dissent became one of the most urgent issues facing Massachusetts' leadership during the first quarter century of the settlement's existence.

However, not all dissent was created equal, and the leaders of the Bay colony consistently recognized differences in both intent and effect when dealing with dissidence. By 1655 the leaders of the Bay colony had identified two distinct sources of dissent. External dissent was based upon a complete rejection of Puritan communitarianism, while internal dissidents remained loyal to the overall Puritan mission while taking issue with some smaller point. Nor were all forms of dissent equally disruptive. The leaders of the Bay Colony dealt with dissidents whose ideologies threatened to undermine Massachusetts' social structure far more harshly than those whose objections were primarily theoretical.

Those two models of dissent were highlighted in 1653 when Harvard College president Henry Dunster converted to the Baptist faith, thus calling into question his suitability to lead Puritan Massachusetts' only college. In negotiating that crisis within the matrix of internal versus external dissent on one hand, and the degree of potential social upheaval on the other, both Dunster and his opponents weighted the Harvard president's motives, evaluated the likely effects of his decision, and proposed a solution based on their findings. Ultimately, the wrangling over Dunster's fate demonstrated that the leaders of Puritan New England did not blindly lash out against anyone who voiced opposition to their policies. Having once been dissenters themselves, Massachusetts' leaders carefully analyzed the source of an individual's dissent, and only then made a determination as to whether reconciliation in that particular case was compatible with their duty to maintain the purity of their holy experiment.

Harvard College was one of the most important institutions created by the Puritans during the first quarter century of their sojourn in British North America. Massachusetts governor John Winthrop and his colleagues understood that one of the biggest challenges they faced was passing down the legacy of Puritanism, with all of its spiritual fervor and intellectual intensity, to their children and grandchildren. Moreover, it was important to New England's founders that the process of moral and

religious instruction be institutionalized, rather than relying haphazardly upon the educational efforts of parents and ministers.

Such was the motivation behind the establishment of Harvard College under the leadership of Nathaniel Eaton in 1636. Implicit within the college’s mission was the duty to foster orthodoxy within New England’s next generation of leadership. The 1655 bylaws of the college insisted that students “eschew the profanation of Gods holy Name, Attributes, Word, or Ordinances, & Times of worship, and in the publique assemblyes they shall Carefully eschew whatsoever may shew any Contempt or neglect there-of.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, it was the responsibility of the college’s leadership to define and enforce the parameters of proper Puritan thought. Once again, the bylaws stipulated that “once a Fort-Night..., the President and Fellows shall take Care that heterodox opinions and Doctrines bee avoided & refuted & such as are according to the...Faith be held forth & Confirmed.”<sup>3</sup> Harvard’s purpose went beyond mere instruction in logic, language, and natural science; rather, the college existed in order to instill within the youth of Massachusetts the values essential to the continuation of New England’s distinct mission.

Harvard’s first master, Nathaniel Eaton, soon “marvellously deceived the Expectations of Good Men concerning him.”<sup>4</sup> In September 1639, the General Court summoned Eaton, charged him with embezzling from the college, whipping his students with “between twenty and thirty stripes at a time” and beating one student in particular with “a walnut-tree plant big enough to have killed a horse and a yard in length.”<sup>5</sup> Students also bitterly complained about the quality of room and board they received from Mrs. Eaton, recounting nightmarish meals where “their mackerel” was “brought to them with their guts in them, and

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<sup>2</sup> “The Lawes of the Colledge Published Publiquely before the Students of Harvard Colledge, May 4. 1655,” *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts), 31: 329.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 31: 334.

<sup>4</sup> *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1925), 15: lxxi.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 58: 53.

goat's dung in their hasty pudding."<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, the magistrates convicted Eaton of "sundry abuses & inhumane severities by him acted towards the schollars under his charge," and "was openly sentenced and removed from his....Trust."<sup>7</sup>

The magistrates of Massachusetts Bay unexpectedly found themselves in an urgent search for a new president who could be trusted to uphold the mission of Harvard College. A promising candidate soon presented himself in the person of Reverend Henry Dunster.<sup>8</sup> Dunster (1609-1658) was born in Bury, Lancashire, England and received his education at Cambridge University. After receiving his M.A. degree in 1634, Dunster assumed the pastorate at the church at Bury, and also found employment as a schoolteacher. However, he soon found the England of Charles I inhospitable to a man of Puritan sympathies, and he made the journey to Massachusetts Bay in 1640. Dunster's reputation for both erudition and piety, coupled with the fortuitous timing of his arrival in America, seemed to make him the perfect man to replace Eaton. That same year, the General Court noted that it had concluded the search for Harvard's next leader when in August 1640 "the Reverend

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Builders of the Bay Colony* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1930), 191.

<sup>7</sup> *CSM Publications*, 15: 173.

<sup>8</sup> Outside of institutional histories of Harvard College, little has been written about Henry Dunster. Even within that context, Dunster is recognized primarily for his role in nurturing the growth of the young college, rather than for the significance of his conflict with the government over infant baptism. In fact, Dunster's foremost historian, Samuel Eliot Morison, wrote in 1930 that Dunster was "the most eminent and the most lovable" of Massachusetts' early leaders, and painstakingly set forth the myriad ways in which the Harvard president advanced the cause of higher education in colonial America. In discussing Dunster's eventual dismissal from his position, Morison simply remarked that the president was treated "with a consideration that no other dissenter enjoyed," but nonetheless, "to his honor, refused to dissemble the faith that was in him." Although Morison concluded that all three parties (the colony, the college, and Dunster) acquitted themselves with "equal honor," no attempt was made to fit the Dunster case into the larger pattern of authority and dissent in early New England. Morison, 183, 214-15.

Henry Dunster was..., invited to accept the place of President of the Colledge, which he accordingly accepted.”<sup>9</sup>

Dunster immediately addressed Eaton’s troubled legacy. The new president was strongly committed to raising academic standards and quickly transformed Harvard from a provincial boarding-school into a full-fledged college. Using Oxford and Cambridge as his models, Dunster instituted a clear set of admissions guidelines and established a four year curriculum required for graduation. Harvard’s new leader was also vitally concerned about the role of the institution in the larger social and intellectual life of the colony, and played an active role in encouraging the college’s graduates to remain in Massachusetts instead of pocketing their degrees and returning to England. Dunster was also instrumental in establishing the colony’s first printing press, which he operated throughout his tenure with the school. In addition to his academic duties, Dunster worked tirelessly to bring financial stability to the college, often dipping into his own resources for the benefit of Harvard.

In almost every respect, Dunster exceeded the expectations of the Puritan magistrates who ruled Massachusetts. Nevertheless, tension eventually seeped into that allegedly “perfect” relationship. In the fall of 1653, Dunster became the proud parent of a baby boy. However, few of Dunster’s colleagues failed to notice when he chose not to present that child for baptism. By 1653 Dunster had converted to the Baptist creed, which forbade the baptism of infants and offered the sacrament only to adult converts. Consequently, Dunster was summoned before the Middlesex county court. The record of Dunster’s appearance before the judges reads as follows:

Mr. Henry Dunster, being summoned to answer...for not bringing his Child to the Holy ordinance of Baptisme ...appeared in Court and made his answer thereunto, pleading that he could not do it in faith as all well Knew, and also naming divers Authours concerning that poynt, affirmed that none of them had given any demonstrative argument touching infant Baptisme..., but in after discourse being charged with the falseness of his assercion therein by the Governor he answered...and said

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<sup>9</sup> *CSM Publications*, 15: 173.

it was so to his conscience. The Court solemnly admonished him of his dangerous Error.<sup>10</sup>

As it turned out, the magistrates' difficulties with the renegade president were just beginning. On February 3, 1655, the Middlesex county court recorded that Dunster was "presented to this court....for the disturbance of the ordinances of Christ upon the Lords day at Cambridge July the 30th 1654 to the dishonor of the name of Christ his truth & ministers." It is not surprising that the ordinance that Dunster interrupted was once again that of infant baptism. The court records went on to state that several witnesses testified on oath that "Dunster spake to the Congregation in the time of publique ordinance to the interrupcion thereof without leave, which was also aggravated in that he being desired by the Elder to forbear, and not to interrupt an ordinance of Christ, yet not with standing he proceeded in way of Complaint to the Congregation."<sup>11</sup>

Dunster went on to present several arguments that he felt weighed heavily against the practice of infant baptism. First of all, Dunster felt only "vissible penitent believers" ought to be baptized, thus eliminating young children yet incapable of repentance. Secondly, Dunster believed that infant baptism corresponded to neither the teachings or examples of Christ as presented in the New Testament. Next, the Harvard president contended that the circumcision of children in ancient Israel was not a valid precedent of baptizing babies under the New Covenant. Finally, Dunster emphasized the duty of every Christian to speak out against practices that they believed were corrupting the purity of the church.<sup>12</sup>

In response, the court sentenced Dunster to be admonished publicly at the next church meeting in Cambridge. Dunster did not turn out to be as remorseful for his actions as the court might have hoped. In an April 4, 1655 letter to the Grand Jury, Dunster protested that "I am not conscious that I did or say anything contemptuously or in open contempt

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<sup>10</sup> David Pulsifer, ed., *Records of the County of Middlesex, in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts* (Boston: Commissioners of the County of Middlesex, 1851), 132-33.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-76.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 74-75.

of Gods word or messengers, and therefore I am not guilty of the breach of that law.” In fact, Dunster went on to say that “I spake the truth in the feare of God, and dare not deny the same or go from it untill the Lord otherwise teach me.”<sup>13</sup>

Dunster’s new opinions sparked a crisis within the colony’s leadership. On the one hand, Dunster’s heterodoxy seemed at odds with the college’s function as a bastion of Massachusetts’ Puritan identity. On the other hand, Dunster’s personal integrity was well known, and the progress that the college had made under his leadership was indisputable. Certainly, the magistrates believed that the best possible outcome would be to persuade Dunster to retract his new-found Baptist opinions. Shortly after Dunster refused baptism for his young son, the ministers of the Bay colony met with Dunster and urged him to reconsider his position, but to no avail.

Slowly but surely, the authorities sought to increase the pressure on Dunster to conform. On May 3, 1654, the General Court passed the following resolution:

Forasmuch as it greatly concernes the welfare of this country that the youth thereof be educated, not only in good literature, but sound doctrine, this Court doth therefore commend it to the serious consideration & speciall care of the ovseers of the college....not to admitt or suffer any such to be contynued in the office or place of teaching, educating, or instructing of youth or child, in the colledge or schooles, that have manifested themselves unsound in the fayth, or scandelous in their lives, & not giving due satisfaction according to the rules of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

The following month, Dunster resigned his position as president of Harvard.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>14</sup> Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* (Boston: The Press of William White, 1853), 3: 343-44.



The magistrates of Massachusetts still held out some hope that Dunster might choose to return to the fold. In response to Dunster's resignation, the General Court ordered the college overseers to begin a search "for some meete person to carry an end that worke for the present." However, the door was still left open for Dunster's return, since that search was to commence only "in case he persist in his resolution more than one moneth."<sup>15</sup>

In the meantime, the overseers of the college launched one last campaign to retain Dunster, even going so far as to beg him "to remain and keep his dangerous opinions to himself."<sup>16</sup> At first, Dunster was "enformed to some measure of satisfaction" by the overseers' offer, and "in submissive willingnesse reassumed his place."<sup>17</sup> However, Dunster remained uncomfortable with that compromise and the code of silence it imposed upon him. Finally, in October 1654, Dunster, "upon diverse considerations & weighty Reasons," made his resignation final.<sup>18</sup> In a telling move, as the college overseers once again faced the task of appointing a new president, they stipulated that it was "expected and desired" that Harvard's new president, Reverend Charles Chauncy, "forbeare to disseminate or publish any Tenets concerning the necessity of immersion in Baptisme & Celebration of the Lords Supper at Evening, or to oppose the received Doctrine therein."<sup>19</sup> For his part, by the fall of 1655, Dunster had left the confines of the Bay Colony in favor of the town of Scituate in Plymouth, where he lived until his death in 1659.

The furor surrounding Dunster's resignation reveals much about the way in which the leadership of Massachusetts Bay conceptualized dissent in the 1650s. Puritan intellectuals understood the fiery anti-authoritarianism from which their movement emerged. Protestantism

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 3: 352.

<sup>16</sup> Morison, 215.

<sup>17</sup> "Dunster's Petition to the General Court, November 4, 1654," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts), 49: 60.

<sup>18</sup> *CSM Publications*, 15: 186.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15: 206-07.

had been born out of a rejection of Roman Catholicism during the sixteenth century. In the same way, English Puritanism was a reaction against the failure of England’s established church to repudiate completely its Catholic roots. Many of New England’s first colonists knew first hand the adversarial relationship that existed between Puritanism and the English establishment. In 1654, Edward Johnson, one of Massachusetts’ founders, contemplated England’s religious decline. Instead of “purging out Popery” and embracing pure Protestant doctrine, Johnson believed that the English nation had attempted an ill-fated compromise with Catholic ritualism that resulted in “the multitude of irreligious lascivious and popish affected persons” spreading throughout “the whole land like Grashoppers.” However, even in the midst of that Old World decadence, God’s redemptive purposes could not be thwarted. Johnson concluded that “in this very time Christ....raises an Army out of our English Nation, for freeing his people from....Prelacy; and because very corner of England was filled with the fury of malignant adversaries, Christ creates a New England to muster up....his Forces in.”<sup>20</sup> For many, New England existed as a form of institutionalized dissent, being a real place where the abstract criticisms that Puritans leveled at the church and state in England could be acted upon, and a better, more Christian society built.

One of the more ironic aspects of the Puritan trek to Massachusetts was that it immediately transformed the migration’s architects from lifelong dissidents into an established leadership class. In pre-Revolutionary England, Puritans had been spared the challenges that accompanied the formation of a government or the management of an established church; instead, the nexus of the Puritan movement typically lay within a number of diverse and decentralized cells that voluntarily adhered to a certain set of ideals and attracted members through persuasion and theological argument. However, in New England, Winthrop and his companions immediately encountered the complexities of dealing with dissent while wielding power, and of facing down dissidents as opponents, instead of standing beside them as fellow travellers.

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<sup>20</sup> Edward Johnson, “Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Saviour” *The Puritans*, ed. Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1938), 1: 143-44.

However, dissent in colonial New England manifested itself in a number of ways, and the leaders of the Bay colony recognized that all expressions of dissent could not be lumped together into a single category. In fact, a couple of specific standards should be utilized when examining dissent in early New England. In order to understand the reactions triggered by a certain instance of dissent, it must first be established whether the dissent could be expected to create an outcome with definite social ramifications, or if the issue in question was simply theoretical. Secondly, it must be determined whether the source of the dissent was internal or external. Was the critique based upon pre-suppositions shared by most Puritans, or was it the product of a new world view altogether?

The first variable in the equation of dissent was that of social stability. No matter how provocative an idea was in the abstract, it cannot be denied that sometimes that same idea would have few, if any, practical consequences. Although Puritan thought in Massachusetts had coalesced around a core of shared theological and political ideas by the mid-1600s, the rulers of the Bay Colony were clearly uninterested in establishing an exclusive intellectual monopoly or staying in power through the ignorance of their citizenry. In fact, Massachusetts' first generation of leaders sought to cultivate a dynamic intellectual life in the colony and laid the groundwork for an extensive educational system. That emphasis on scholarship was nothing new, since "in England the Puritans had been noted for their respect for learning, demanding it of the clergy, encouraging it among the laity, and spreading it by the endowment of schools and lectureships." Both the founding of Harvard College in 1636 and the passage of the Massachusetts School Act in 1647, which mandated that a grammar school be established in every town with a population of over fifty households, demonstrated the premium Puritans placed upon learning. Students of the period have identified two reasons why Puritans so valued education. First, "knowledge....was important for reasons of religion -- God revealed himself in nature, history, and the Scriptures, and it was man's responsibility to study and learn the lessons thus provided him." However, learning also served men well during this life, and "was also important if men were to know and obey the law and protect their rights

against potential tyrants.”<sup>21</sup> Another example of that emphasis on education can be found in the intellectual repartee that existed between several ministers in early Massachusetts, whose surviving correspondence depicts a class of professionals with a thirst for “the exchange of ideas between mutually respectful colleagues of a scholarly bent.”<sup>22</sup>

A fine line existed between academic debate and ideologies that threatened the colony’s social stability. The Puritans understood that certain ideas that originated in the wrangling over theological subtleties could also potentially destabilize society in concrete ways. The social tumult that accompanied the radical Reformation of the sixteenth century was never far from the minds of educated Puritans. The possibility that events such as Jan of Leiden’s 1534 Anabaptist revolution in Munster could be repeated reminded Puritans of the importance of keeping their eyes open for signs of doctrinal deviance.<sup>23</sup> Thomas Dudley nicely summarized those fears when he remarked during Anne Hutchinson’s civil trial that “these disturbances that have come among the Germans have been all grounded upon revelations, and so they that have vented them have stirred up their hearers to take up arms against their prince and to cut the throats one of another, and these have been the fruits of them,

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<sup>21</sup> Francis J. Bremer, *The Puritan Experiment: New England Society from Bradford to Edwards* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1995), 117-19.

<sup>22</sup> Sargent Bush, Jr., “After Coming Over: John Cotton, Peter Bulkeley, and Learned Discourse in the Wilderness,” *Studies in the Literary Imagination*, 27 (Spring 1994), 9.

<sup>23</sup>In 1534, radical Anabaptists under the leadership of Jan of Leiden seized power in the Westphalian city of Munster. While the city’s prince-bishop struggled to regain control, Leiden declared himself the king of Zion, re-baptized his tried-and-true followers, expelled those who doubted his messianic mission, abolished private property, and instituted polygamy. After the city finally fell in 1535 to a coalition of German nobility, Leiden’s followers were slaughtered, and the Anabaptist leader’s mutilated corpse was hung in a cage from the church spires, where it served for the next three centuries as a warning to potential religious revolutionaries. De Lamar Jensen, *Reformation Europe: Age of Reform and Revolution* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Co., 1992), 113-16.

and whether the devil may inspire the same into their hearts here I know not.”<sup>24</sup>

The overall effect on social stability was only one of the factors that characterized dissent in early New England. Another important consideration was to what degree a given dissident had ceased to identify with the larger Puritan identity. The most renowned cases of dissent in early Massachusetts were instances of “dissent from without” (external dissent), or situations where a given dissident had already cast off large portions of the Puritan worldview. In such cases, dissidents often jettisoned the holistic vision of a unified Puritan community as part of their pilgrimage toward a new worldview. Rejecting the idea of a whole community acting in concert, with each and every member accepting their God-given place within the whole, such dissenters instead arrived at different sets of socio-religious conclusions that were fundamentally incompatible with Puritan communitarianism.

The most famous examples of external dissent in early Massachusetts were Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson. Williams’ rabid Separatism undermined the Puritans’ mission to reform the Church of England, his insistence of freedom of conscience challenged the church-state alliance that existed in New England, and his advocacy of Native American rights called into question the Bay colony’s political legitimacy. As for Hutchinson, her emphasis on free grace called into question the role of good works in Puritan life, her direct personal revelations from God undercut the power of the established church, and her persistence in teaching despite her sex shook the Bay’s social structure. In each instance, the investigation commenced with a series of discussions and conferences designed to begin a dialogue, examine the conditions necessary for reconciliation, and to gauge which type of dissent the authorities were up against. In both cases, it became apparent that little common ground existed between the dissident and the colony’s religious and political leadership, and that both ideologies pointed toward a radical renovation of New England society. Thus, in a series of well-known trials in the mid-1630s, both Williams and Hutchinson were banished from Massachusetts.

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<sup>24</sup> “The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newtown,” *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638*, ed. David D. Hall (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 343.

In the eyes of Winthrop and his fellow magistrates, such individuals deliberately severed themselves from the larger Puritan body by embracing a form of libertinism. The Massachusetts governor believed that two types of liberty were possible within a society: natural and civil. Winthrop explained that “the first [natural liberty] is common to man with beasts and other creatures” and allowed mankind “to do what he lists; it is liberty to evil as well as to good”:

This liberty is incompatible and inconsistent with authority, and cannot endure the least restraint of the most just authority. The exercise and maintaining of this liberty makes men grow more evil, and in time to be worse than brute beasts....This is that great enemy of truth and peace, that wild beast, which all the ordinances of God are bent against, to restrain and subdue it.

What Winthrop called “natural liberty” really amounted to anarchy and was not an objective worthy of a righteous society. Winthrop instead advocated the pursuit of a different kind of liberty, which he referred to as “civil” or “moral” liberty. Such civil liberty was based upon the “covenant between God and man, in the moral law, and the politic covenants and constitutions, amongst men themselves.” The governor continued:

This liberty is the proper end and object of authority, and cannot subsist without it; and it is a liberty to that only which is good, just, and honest. This liberty you are to stand for, with the hazard....of your lives, if need be. Whatsoever crosseth this, is not authority, but a distemper thereof. This liberty is maintained and exercised in away of subjection to authority.<sup>25</sup>

The highest form of liberty was one that put certain restrictions upon the extremes of human behavior. True civil liberty rested upon the assumption that God faithfully revealed His will to even the most rebellious sinners through the scriptures, the ministry of the church, and

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<sup>25</sup> John Winthrop, “Winthrop’s Speech to the General Court, July 3, 1645,” *The Puritans*, ed. Miller and Johnson, 206-207.

the dictates of godly magistrates. Since divine truth was evident and available to all through those channels, any persistent rejection of those values must ultimately be deemed a deliberate rejection of orthodox Christianity. In the end, the state was responsible for prohibiting any gross departures from that body of accepted doctrine. The Ipswich minister Nathaniel Ward put it succinctly in 1645 when he wrote “that all Familists, Antinomians, Anabaptists, and other enthusiasts shall have free liberty to keep away from us.”<sup>26</sup>

However, some instances of dissent pitted individuals against one another who nevertheless still accepted and maintained their place within the Puritan community. While such dissenters might advance notions that ran contrary to certain elements within the Puritan identity, they still continued to see themselves as part of that mission, and as part of that community were therefore obligated to respond to concerns voiced by the colony’s political and religious leaders. Because of those shared assumptions, that “dissent from within” (or internal dissent) offered the leaders of Massachusetts Bay a much wider range of options in dealing with dissidence. In dealing with external dissent, the colonial leadership often employed tactics of expulsion, suppression, and brute force, since those individuals, by abdicating their place within Puritan society, could not be depended upon to respond to less coercive measures. However, unlike the external dissidents, internal dissenters who had never forfeited their place within the Puritan social scheme could be relied upon to understand the importance of engaging their critics in dialogue and actively participating in and respecting the community’s process of investigation and self-correction.

Perhaps the best example of internal dissent was the Watertown minister George Philips. In 1631, Philips announced his opinion that the Roman Catholic Church was a true form of Christianity, despite overwhelming Puritan opinion to the contrary. The next year, Philips challenged the right of the General Court to levy taxes upon the colony’s towns. In both cases, the colonial leadership defused the conflict through dialogue. Philips’ stood as one of Massachusetts’ most respected ministers, and his allegiance to the colony was well-known. So even though Philips’ position on the taxation question had the potential to be

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<sup>26</sup> Nathaniel Ward, “The Simple Cobler of Aggawam,” *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, ed. Perry Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 96-97.

socially disruptive, the attitude of the colony’s leadership toward Philips was uniformly conciliatory. The magistrates settled the Catholicism controversy through a series of informal meetings with Philips and his congregation at Watertown. The following year, a public rebuke from the General Court sufficed to convince the Watertown pastor to back down from his position on the colonial levy.

Ultimately, the colony’s position regarding Philips was amply rewarded. Not only did Philips both times yield to the collective wisdom of the colony’s ministers and magistrates and retreat from his controversial opinions, but five years later such a level of solidarity existed between the Watertown pastor and the Bay’s leadership that he stood as one of Anne Hutchinson’s accusers at her civil trial in 1637. Although he often disagreed with the authorities in Boston on particular details of doctrine or political policy, in the end Philips could be relied upon to distinguish between internal and external dissent, and between disagreements that were merely abstract and those that threatened to shake Puritan society.<sup>27</sup>

Finally, dissent in early New England must be considered in light of the reactions it provoked. The first response to dissent deployed by the leaders of Massachusetts Bay was to open dialogue through the colony’s interpersonal network. Such dialogue might range in tone from an open discussion about the disputed issue to a rather candid appeal to the collective wisdom of the community that would be used to pressure the dissident to retreat back within the bounds of the Puritan identity. Much has been written about the pervasive communitarianism that undergirded American Puritan thought. In theory, each person was a valued member of the community; an individual whose spiritual welfare must be taken into account in the formation of public policy. One of the responsibilities of Puritan society as a whole was to turn individuals away from their errors and make them into productive members of Massachusetts’ religious, political, and economic communities. It was

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<sup>27</sup> For more on Philips’ opinion on the Catholic Church, see Timothy L. Wood, “‘A Church Still by Her First Covenant’: George Philips and a Puritan View of Roman Catholicism,” *The New England Quarterly* 72 (March 1999): 28-41. For an account of the taxation controversy, see John Winthrop, *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630-1649* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 63. For Philips’ role at Hutchinson’s trial, see “Hutchinson Examination at Newtown,” 321-22.



infinitely preferable to reconcile an individual back to the Puritan mission through informal discussion than to proceed against them via the formal mechanisms of the church and the state and risk permanently alienating them from the Puritan fold.

If such interpersonal persuasion failed, the colony held several other more coercive tactics in reserve. As the spiritual guardian of the colony, the church was often deployed as a bulwark against dissent. In exercising its power to define and uphold doctrine, each congregation could form itself into an ecclesiastical tribunal, hear cases concerning doctrinal deviation or gross immorality, and deliver religious verdicts ranging from public censure to excommunication. Dissent also elicited political and legal responses. In the rare cases where the magistrates themselves seemed to be advocating opinions that fell outside the mainstream of Puritan thought, the voters of the colony would be expected to band together and remove the offending officeholder at the next election. More often than not, though, the magistrates found themselves cast as the opponents of dissent. To proceed against an individual in the General Court was the last resort when dealing with the most unrepentant dissidents. Unlike the colony's interpersonal network (whose power was only persuasive), and the church (whose power was only spiritual), the colonial government controlled the legal machinery that could decide the fate of an individual's property, or even their life. If there remained any possibility of winning a given dissenter back over to the Puritan mission, such legal intervention was unnecessary and undesirable. However, when a person had already discarded their Puritan identity on the philosophical level, often the colonial leaders saw little choice other than physically to separate such dissidents as well.

Certainly, Dunster's departure from Puritan orthodoxy was unwelcome news to the civil and religious leaders of Massachusetts. As the leader of Harvard College, Dunster was charged with upholding the Puritan social mission as defined by the General Court, and instilling the ideals of Puritanism in the next generation. However, by converting to the Baptist faith, he abandoned many of the ideals he was hired to defend. After his conversion, he served as chief administrator of a religious institution whose doctrines he rejected, and as a vocal member of a religious minority in a community that emphasized religious unity.

Because of Dunster's unique position, his case exhibits traits of both internal and external dissent. Since Dunster was singularly qualified to lead the college and since most magistrates wanted to see him continued

in that post, the colonial leadership made every effort to treat his case as one of internal dissent. Even after disrupting a baptismal service at the Cambridge church in order to vent publicly his newfound opinions, Dunster was released with only an official rebuke. Dunster was also privately counseled by a delegation of the colony’s ministers, but to no avail. Even after he persisted in his opinions, the college overseers were willing to allow Dunster to continue as the president of Harvard, providing he kept his theological opinions confidential. Because Dunster’s abilities corresponded so well to the young college’s needs, the leaders of the Bay Colony desperately wanted to believe that effective communication between the two parties was still possible, and that the Harvard president was yet another internal dissident who might well be won back over to the Puritan mainstream.

However, from Dunster’s perspective the issue ran far deeper than his objection to certain points in Puritan doctrine. The Harvard president no longer accepted the finely nuanced definitions of dissent that his opponents were using to affect his reconciliation. Even before his conversion to Baptist doctrine, there is evidence that Dunster was already developing his own alternative views on dissent and academic freedom. As historian Samuel Eliot Morison remarked:

It has always been a puzzle why no religious test was ever adopted at Harvard; the absence of one allowed the college to gain a reputation for liberalism. Every European university, even...in tolerant Holland, had such tests. It is unlikely that the puritan founders merely forgot to insert one, for by 1650 they had had plenty of trouble with religious dissenters, and it would have been inconsistent with their way of thinking to have omitted a test from a liberal motive. Possibly Dunster...had uneasy twinges of conscience about their required subscription to canons of the Church in which they did not believe, when taking a degree at Oxford or Cambridge. The experience may well have shown what a farce religious tests were in a university.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Morison, 213.

In most cases, the authorities of the Bay Colony made the final determination whether a dissenter would be treated as internal or external. In this situation Dunster cast the deciding vote. Although the ministers and magistrates hoped to keep him engaged in dialogue, Dunster willingly withdrew himself from that process. Understanding his own inability to conform to their expectations, Dunster resigned his position and relocated from Massachusetts Bay to Plymouth. Like Roger Williams, Dunster had arrived at the point in his intellectual journey where he valued the sanctity of the individual conscience over the social order promoted by philosophical and theological unanimity. But unlike Williams, Dunster understood why he must leave and did so voluntarily. The Harvard president knew that the Bay Colony's spiritual mission could not be fulfilled without a high level of consensus within Massachusetts society. Having turned his back on that common vision, Dunster realized he no longer belonged in that community. Ultimately, he recognized that enough common assumptions had been lost to render future discussion fruitless. Out of options, Dunster voluntarily cast himself in the role of an external dissident, and by moving to Plymouth, imposed a form of self-banishment upon himself.

Dissent played a recognized and expected role in the political and religious life of the Massachusetts Bay Colony during the first quarter century of its existence. Although Puritanism remained a relatively uncompromising worldview in terms of theology and political theory, a spectrum of political and religious responses were still available to the leaders of Massachusetts when addressing dissent within the community. Far from being summarily condemned, dissenters were often seen by their fellow Puritans as exhibiting the kind of moral and spiritual honesty one might expect in a devoutly Protestant society. In such cases, the mission of the church and state was clearly one of reconciliation. The colony's leadership did not automatically see dissent as a symptom of an unhealthy society, and one of the hallmarks of effective Puritan government was its ability to defuse principled apposition and reconcile dissenters back to the Puritan way.

Instead, the question that confronted the colony's leadership was one of degree. While some internal dissent might simply be the uncertain and faltering steps of a misguided conscience in its search for the truth, Puritan authorities recognized that dissent also came in a more destructive form. Such external dissidents had moved beyond the realm

of mere doubt and uncertainty into an outright rejection of the Massachusetts experiment. In such cases, the leaders of the Bay Colony recognized that reconciliation might no longer be possible. Protest that threatened to undermine New England’s unique mission and open the door to social turmoil, either directly or implicitly, must be removed. In those circumstances, the political and religious authority of the colony might be properly directed toward the elimination of individuals or movements that threatened it.

Henry Dunster’s conversion to the Baptist faith in 1653 -- and the controversy that surrounded it -- demonstrated both of those models of dissent at work. Because of his distinguished record as an educator, the leaders of the Bay Colony hoped Dunster could be dealt with as an internal dissenter. By offering to let him keep his job in exchange for his silence, the colonial leadership sought to test both Dunster’s willingness to place their authority and collective wisdom above his own beliefs, and to minimize any social damage that the conversion of Harvard’s president to Baptist beliefs might precipitate. On the other hand, Dunster recognized the futility of further discussion. The Harvard president could not cloak his own convictions in silence, nor did he wish to remain in the colony and become the source of social upheaval. In the end, Dunster opted for exile -- the final recourse for those individuals whose consciences would no longer allow them to remain in fellowship with the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay.