

PROVIDENCE PILGRIMAGE

Convocation in The Baptist  
MEETING HOUSE

In Honor of The Northern Baptist Convention  
in Boston

Printed by The Watchman Examiner

I AM happy to take an official part in welcoming you to this shrine, for in a classical case of yoking two dissimilar and disparate things together, it was built "for the publick Worship of Almighty GOD and also for holding Commencement in." Commencement has been held here ever since 1776, and is still held here—even though the room has been filled to overflowing for many years. No other church in America, I believe, has so long and so continuous a relationship to a university as that between this Meeting House and Brown.

I welcome you the more heartily because I am the first in the succession of eleven presidents who has not been either a minister of this church or a member of it. Our first president, James Manning, guided both the infant college and your religious society. In fact, it was he who preached the sermon dedicating this building exactly 175 years ago this month. Since I am a member of a different congregation, my welcome is more particularly that of an officer of the University rather than of one who fully shares this fellowship.

There is a peculiar appropriateness in having a University Convocation in connection with your Pilgrimage, for this church and the university upon the hill have always had freedom as the core of their being—spiritual freedom and intellectual freedom. The Meeting House would never have been established in this spot if religious freedom had not been curtailed and denied elsewhere. Your first leader, over three centuries ago, cried out against "rigidities and persecutions." The first bell that hung in the beautiful steeple had as its inscription:

FOR FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE THE TOWN WAS FIRST PLANTED,  
PERSUASION, NOT FORCE, WAS USED BY THE PEOPLE:

THIS CHURCH IS THE ELDEST AND HAS NOT RECALLED,  
ENJOYING AND GRANTING BELL, TEMPLE, AND STEEPLE.

The University would not have been conceived, a century and a quarter later, in the extraordinarily broad terms of its famous charter, if intellectual freedom had not been limited and hampered in other political jurisdictions. Freedom to worship God in accordance with individual conviction and freedom to search for truth, and so enlighten the mind, are the root ideas of the concept of freedom. From these essentials all other manifestations of freedom—economic, political, and social—stem.

### Religious and Intellectual Freedom Under a Cloud

It would be folly not to perceive that the fundamental presuppositions of the Meeting House and the University, of Roger Williams and James Manning, are today under a cloud. Religious and intellectual freedom have been enjoyed so long—the work of this church and others like it, and the task of the University and its counterparts elsewhere have been done so well—that the struggle for their attainment is forgotten.

Being taken for granted, they are undervalued, and emphasis is placed upon economic advance; the center of present concern is not even economic freedom—only economic welfare. In many lands during this first half of the twentieth century, men have shown a willingness—indeed, an eagerness—to surrender their birthright for a mess of pottage. As MacLeish wrote in *The Irresponsibles*, "Great numbers of men in various parts of the world

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# Providence Pilgrimage

By Henry M. Wriston

wish passionately and even violently to give up the labor of liberty and to surrender their wills and their bodies and even their minds to the will of a leader."

If one has the faith and the energy to move mountains they are likely to stay where they are put. So with other great material advance. What is done in one generation remains to all generations that follow. But freedom with every individual, and it is not reborn with successors; it must be achieved anew, generation by generation. Forgetfulness of this distinction leads us to forget also that not only is "eternal vigilance . . . price of liberty," as an early patriot said, but renewed persistent, unflagging effort must be expended just to the ground that has been gained previously; even the most intense exertion must be made if the world is to progress.

No century of modern times has seen so vast a retreat from freedom as is represented by Fascism, Nazism, Communism. Even victory in two wars, while checked by the physical expansion of those hostile ideologies, has tributed little or nothing to awakening in men's minds passion for liberty and evoking the will to maintain freedom.

At the current juncture, it would be easier to "fight good fight" against the dominant materialism, and economic determinism that lies beneath it, if they were more openly professed and represented a logical and clear position. But the materialism which dominates Western political life arises from confusion of the rather than from explicit dogma. Consequently, the fog has become so clouded that it is as though one fought the fog in the middle of a moonless night; in those circumstances, all precision is lost and even the sense of direction may become utterly confused. The fact that the presumptions underlying political materialism are so vague and imprecise makes the task of overthrowing them difficult.

### Present-Day Clash

In contrast, Russian dialectic materialism, upon which the Soviet tyranny is erected, is intellectually precise, definable, and explicit. It is, therefore, relatively easy to define the issue between true democracy and open Communism. If one is not frightened away from the study by current hysteria, and if one is ready to face facts, he can learn exactly what the Soviets aim to do to the world. When that course is taken, the tension between Communism and Christianity is revealed as not natural, but inevitable. Communism regards the individual as irrelevant—as do all totalitarians; Christianity regards the individual as dominant.

Politically, and even economically, it may prove feasible for the democracies and the Soviets to live in the world, moving along parallel lines, without physical fighting. It may be possible, we are not sure. But it is absolutely impossible for the two systems to live in harmony so long as the concept of freedom of mind, epitomized in the University and the Meeting House, remains a vital part of the American heritage. Politics can make compromises, and economics is a flexible instrument; freedom has no such ductile quality. The

## *The Baptist Meeting House and Brown University.*

sians reject it utterly; Roger Williams and James Manning insisted upon it. There is no middle ground that is worth holding. Our present danger is heightened by failure to realize that fact.

Too much public attention is being centered upon military and economic preparedness; not enough thought is put upon the essentiality of intellectual clarity and moral courage. If we continue along the muddy-minded road of materialism, which presently obscures our basic ideals, we will surely go to war—and may well lose, for the Russians take their materialism very seriously. We could never gain a real victory by force of arms, or even by economic leverage alone. War fought with those weapons alone, even if it appeared to succeed, could not produce real victory; it would be “almost indistinguishable from defeat,” as Churchill once described another apparent triumph. Liberty would have been sacrificed in the name of its own defense.

Military preparedness and economic strength are both necessary; but by themselves they are impotent. They are useful only to the degree that they reflect and support the basic drives of the mind and the spirit which have shaped the course of our history. I wish it were clear to the public that the resolution of the tensions between the two systems can come only as part of an intellectual and spiritual triumph. It is because there is no such realization that at this moment the democratic trumpet gives forth an uncertain sound. Long ago, a question was asked that answered itself: “If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself to the battle?” So we have entered into the struggle intellectually much worse off than we are physically, economically, and militarily.

Until the historical fact that spiritual and intellectual freedom precede all others is recognized and its philosophical necessity is effectively reasserted, the world will not find its groping way out of present anarchy and confusion.

### **Our Ultimate Strength**

Our ultimate strength lies in a profound, constant, and

unwavering faith in freedom. Our present weakness accentuated by the fact that, amidst the turmoil of power politics, economic rivalries, and social disturbances, we have come to misunderstand toleration. Toleration is one of the most important by-products of true intellectual and spiritual freedom, but it has been misinterpreted as meaning lack of conviction.

This confusion has led us to feel that, if we are truly tolerant, we cannot take firm and strong positions without denying our basic tenets and rending the fabric of our convictions. It is a measure of our retreat from the clear and explicit teachings of Jesus. He never pretended that we did not have enemies; indeed, he identified them. The enemies he identified—greed, pride, and the rest—were still face today. He did not say that we should not resist the enemy; indeed, everything that he said was to the contrary. The distinctive element in his teaching was the temper in which that resistance was to be carried forward. He said to love your enemies. When love of enemies is sentimentally misunderstood, it comes to mean failure to resist the wrong things the enemy is doing—the things which Jesus never condoned. He distinguished between the person, whom he could love, and the act, for which he felt intense moral abhorrence.

Our confusion accounts for the fact that we waver while the Communists, whose doctrine is spiritually incredible, pursue their objectives with fanatic zeal; we resist them by the military and economic instrumentalities of their choice, rather than by first clarifying our mind, defining our faith, and following the path to the goal which was set before us by the founders of the Meeting House and the University. Liberalism is confused with loose tolerance is taken to be negative acceptance of what is wrong. This is so because of want of clearheaded recognition that the spiritual freedom for which this Meeting House stands and the intellectual freedom by which also the University can be justified have somehow ceased to be primary in the mental and moral scheme of our world. We must return to a firm insistence that they be made so.

For that purpose our institutions, so closely related historically and spiritually, were established; their work unfinished; indeed, it is unending. It is fitting that we should, in this place, pledge anew fidelity to the mission which we share.