



The Eyes of All People Are Upon Us

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BOSTON WAS A REVOLUTIONARY TOWN from the start. In the fall of 1630, seven hundred British settlers aboard eleven caravels anchored off the shores of Massachusetts Bay and founded a town they believed would be a beacon to the world. They were Puritans, a group of religious renegades who had broken from the Church of England and had rattled English society for the better part of five decades.

Standing upon the deck of the *Arbella*, the fleet's flagship, John Winthrop delivered a rousing sermon. He described "A Modell of Christian Charity," proposing to the colonists that they were entering into a new covenant with God. He borrowed from the Sermon on the Mount to tell his followers, "[W]e must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."

Hard work, moral uprightness, and an insistence on personal freedom: these Puritan values forged a new society. They also demonstrated how a spiritual enterprise could drive enormous material prosperity. The Puritan belief in higher education poured even more fuel on the fire. The colonists founded Harvard College in 1636, the first university in America. Boston rose to become the commercial, political, religious, and intellectual center of the whole New England region.

On November 5, 1773, Bostonians reclaimed their revolutionary heritage when they met at Faneuil Hall on a Friday evening to discuss what to do about the King's new tax on tea. A few weeks later a mob tossed shiploads of His Majesty's preferred brew into the harbor. The American Revolution spread throughout the country from Boston.

As the new nation got its bearings, Boston refused to sit still. Harvard embraced Unitarianism. The Unitarians rejected the Trinity, arguing that Jesus was a prophet of God but not God Himself. They brought a bunch of other radical notions to the American religious conversation as well, some of which might shed light on why Unitarians seemed to be so attracted to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They insisted that reason and science could coexist with faith. They rejected original sin. And they dared to believe that no one religion could claim an absolute monopoly on truth.

But even they weren't ready for Ralph Waldo Emerson. On July 15, 1838, he stood before the graduating class at the Harvard Divinity School and spoke words that reverberated like hammer strokes off Harvard's hallowed walls.

Emerson, too, had graduated from Harvard, and had been a preacher at Boston's Second Church. But he lamented the lost devotion of the Puritans, and flatly told the students that churches weren't measuring up: "The stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed . . . indicate with sufficient clearness the falsehood of our theology." "It is the office of a true teacher," he pleaded, "to show us that God is, not was; that He speaketh, not spake."

Even though Emerson was speaking to young men about to begin careers in the Christian ministry, he removed the Church from the spiritual equation. The only way to restore true religion, he said, was to empower the individual soul to "go it alone." He challenged them to break with conformity, to inspire their congregations to "dare to love God without mediator or veil."

Ralph Waldo Emerson charged his "Transcendentalism" with the religious zeal of the original Puritan settlers and fused it with the spirit of the American Revolution that set individual freedom and liberty above everything else.

It was a truly *American* take on religion.

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