

# RELIGION IN A COLLEGE:

WHAT PLACE IT SHOULD HAVE.

*BEING AN EXAMINATION OF PRESIDENT ELIOT'S PAPER READ  
BEFORE THE NINETEENTH CENTURY CLUB,  
IN NEW YORK, FEB. 3, 1886.*

BY

JAMES McCOSH, D.D., LL.D., D.LIT..

*President of Princeton College.*

Author of "THE METHOD OF DIVINE GOVERNMENT," THE EMOTIONS,  
PHILOSOPHIC SERIES, &c.

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## PREFATORY NOTE.

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I have engaged in this discussion only from a sense of duty. Unless Christian sentiment arrest it, religion, without being noticed, will disappear from a number of our colleges, that is, from the education and training of many of our abler and promising young men.

I regret that my distinguished opponent did not consent, when I requested it, to his paper being published along with mine, as I should have liked the public to see both sides.

PRINCETON, N. J., Feb. 20, 1886.



## THE PLACE OF RELIGION IN A COLLEGE

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Of late years a great change is going on in many of our American colleges as to the place allotted to religion. Nearly all the older colleges, such as Harvard, Yale and Princeton, were founded in the fear of God, with the blessing of heaven invoked; they gave religious instruction to the students, and had weekly and daily exercises of praise and prayer to Almighty God. But some of them, as they became larger and had a greater and more varied constituency of teachers and students, found a difficulty in carrying out this thoroughly, and are abandoning one position after another, till now little is left. Several colleges founded at a later date make no profession of religion. The universities under State control, being troubled in dealing with the various sects—Christian and Jewish, Catholic and Protestant—have found it easiest to give up all religious services of a systematic kind. I am not sure that the public generally are realizing the change that is taking place—regular preaching being given up one year, and Sabbath and daily devotional exercises a few years after. This “gradual transformation” has been called this

evening by my opponent an "inevitable and blameless process." Surely parents—fathers and mothers—concerned about the training of their children for this life and the life to come, wishing to have knowledge imparted to them, but also to have their character properly formed, should know all this. They should have something to say on this subject as well as the college teachers, most of whom are mere scholars, anxious to promote their several branches of learning, but now taught that they do not need to care for anything beyond.

It is because I feel that we have come to an important crisis, and that fathers and mothers should know it, that I have agreed to engage in this discussion; disputation, except to defend great principles, being uncongenial to my nature.

In taking my side I must have certain things presupposed, otherwise I have nothing to argue from or upon. I presume that I am addressing persons who believe in religion, who believe in God, who believe in a moral law, that we have broken that law, that the soul is immortal, and that there is to be a judgment day. I may assume that I am not addressing a company of agnostics who believe in things that can be seen, in meat and money, but not in things that are spiritual and divine. If I had to argue before such an audience I would have to begin with trying to convince them that religion is a reality. If there be any here who can look abroad on these wondrous works in earth and heaven and discover no design in them, who believe themselves to be upper brutes, and do not acknowledge that they have a soul distinct from the body, or that we have to give an account of the deeds done in the body, whether they have been good or evil, it is of no use for me to address myself to such, for they are committed against me; they cannot wish to have religion in our colleges, for they do not wish it for themselves.



I am not to speak to so thin a section of the community; but to those who, with the great body of people in this country, and all others on the face of the earth, believe that there is a God, and that all men stand in a close and dependent relation towards him. But if there be a religion it is a great and solemn reality, a truth from its very nature above all other truths, and fraught with vast, with infinite issues, transcending all human calculation. This thought will awe us all, especially those who engage in the discussion.

In now proceeding to argue that religion should have a recognized place in a college, I am anxious that it should be understood that I stand up resolutely for the rights of conscience possessed by parents and by students arrived at maturity. No student should be required to attend religious instruction against the will of his parents if he is under age, or his own convictions if he be of age. I am convinced that it is quite possible to keep up religion in a college and yet rigidly adhere to *the conscience clause*, as it is called in Great Britain. This has been done in three hundred colleges in America. I was sixteen years a professor in a government college in Ireland, and had both Catholics and Protestants as pupils, and never had a difficulty. I have been a still longer time at the head of a college in this country, and have had under me Jews and Catholics, and yet never had a dispute with a student on the subject of religion. What I have done could be done by any other man, earnest and yet tolerant.

I give prominence to this principle at the very opening of my paper, as it removes at once certain misapprehensions into which my opponent has been led, and fears which trouble him. He charges religious colleges with "attacking every student with questions," with making denominational membership a condition of beneficiary aid, and

“imposing religious opinions upon a susceptible and unfledged mind.” There is no such thing as this in the great body of American colleges, which profess to teach religion along with other branches. There may be such in a few of what Dr. Eliot calls “thoroughgoing denominational colleges,” with which I have as little concurrence as he has. But it is not so in upward of 300 of American colleges which inculcate religion without interfering with any one’s conscience. In these the prayers and praises offered are of a thoroughly catholic (in the true sense of the term) character. You might attend such colleges for months without discovering what denomination patronizes it. In the college to which I belong, the money-aids, prizes, fellowships and all honors are open to all, whether they make a profession of religion or no, whether they be Jew or Gentile, Protestant or Catholic; whether they come from America, Europe or Asia—say Japan, from all of which bodies we have always students. No attempt is made to make a student change his religious denomination, though endeavors may be made by sermons or conversation to allure him to a prayer-meeting or even to a meeting for a revival of religion—of which I have no such horror as my opponent seems to have.

The President of Harvard stands up for what he calls Unsectarian Colleges. He claims for such that their position is unmistakable. I believe it to be so. It does not mean that they teach religion without sectarianism—which is perfectly possible, I think—but that they teach no religion at all, while possibly, as I know to be the case in some colleges, some of the instructors may be throwing out innuendos which tend to undermine religion in the youthful mind. He describes the position of our professedly religious colleges as unmistakable. I do not find that on the part of any

one there is a mistake as to what we do in Princeton. It is all published in our catalogue. We have prayers with singing, we have Scripture and Scripture teaching; but in the sense I have explained, we force them on no one, and we always respect the religious convictions of parents and of young men of mature age.

Dr. Eliot thinks that religion cannot be maintained in the colleges of a country in which there is no established church. But in our National Congress religion is publicly honored by devotional exercises without any denomination-alism. So in our colleges there may be the worship of God without any sectarian peculiarities.

My opponent has placed the colleges in respect of the place they give to religion under three heads. For my purposes I divide them into two : those which give an important place to religion, having prayer and praise and religious instruction; and those which virtually and actually take no serious interest in divine things. By far the greater number of our 400 colleges belong professedly, and most of them really, to the first class. You will permit me to say that some are sinking into the second, and if Harvard leads a number will follow. It is, if possible, to arrest the descent down this sliding scale that I engage in this discussion.

We may expediently argue in favor of the retention of religion in a college on two grounds: its benefits first to the community, and secondly to the individual student.

I. *The influence of religiously trained men (and women) upon the community.* It is acknowledged on all hands that colleges imparting the highest education in various branches of literature, of science and of philosophy, which call forth the thinking powers of the mind, have an important place and power in advancing a nation. The hundreds of gradu-

ates sent forth every year into every large State in the Union have a mighty influence on the professions which they select and the districts in which they settle, in cities and scattered villages. As ministers of religion, as lawyers, as doctors, as engineers and architects and artists, as private gentlemen living on their money, or employed in various kinds of business or in farming in East or West; these promote the intelligence of the people, stimulate their enterprise, elevate their tastes and even their manners. May they not also exercise a mighty influence, by their example and their teachings, on the morals and piety of their districts? The public are interested to know whether those sent forth among them have or have not been religiously trained when their character and habits were formed. It is declared by my opponent, "Nobody knows how to teach morality effectively without religion."

It is acknowledged on all hands as a matter of fact that Christianity has had a mighty influence in stimulating and in forming modern civilization, making it superior in purity and elevation to the most famous of its ancient forms—that of Greece. Our art and our literature have had their color and shape imparted to them by our holy religion. Our finest statues and paintings have taken up Christian characters and incidents and have embodied in outward shape Christian thought and sentiments. Our Gothic cathedrals are our grandest buildings, rising with their pointed arches to heaven and carrying our thoughts up thither. The most sublime of our modern poets, Dante and Milton, drew their pictures and language from classical models, but got their inspiration from the Bible. It has been shown again and again that Shakespeare, using material from all past history and all countries, is indebted to the Bible more than to any other book. We get some of our highest ideas from that

God-inspired book: such as those of infinity, of eternity, of responsibility, absolute purity, perfection; and these are the ideas which hold the highest place in our highest poetry. It might be maintained that our great religious orators, preachers and poets furnish about the highest literature which we have, the most persuasive and penetrating, searching the deepest secrets of our hearts. Are these to be excluded from the habitual, from the Sabbath teachings of our colleges, because it is alleged they are sectarian? In excluding the holy Scriptures they are taking away the sun from our sky, leaving us only the lesser lights like those of the stars.

Religion has promoted the common arts and industries, and stirred every form of benevolent activity. When people are led to believe that they have immortal souls, that they are responsible to God, that God is good and gave His Son to die for us, they will be prompted and led, yea, forced, to exert themselves in an infinite variety of ways to do good. All modern history testifies that the true, the practical method of progress is first to christianize a people, when civilization will follow as fruit grows from the seed, and not to begin with trying to civilize those who have as yet no taste for knowledge and refinement. Historically, this is the way in which Europe has been brought to its present advanced stage. The schools and universities of Europe were established by men swayed by religious motives. Knox, in Scotland, was the first to set up a system of popular education, and was followed in New England, where they gave a high place to religion in schools and academies.

In this respect my distinguished opponent and myself are alike; we both preside over colleges avowedly set up to promote morality and religion. The motto of Harvard is, *Pro Christo et Ecclesia*, and on the seal of Princeton the

inscription is, *Vitam mortuis reddo*, with *Vet. et Nov. Test.* In upwards of three hundred colleges these words might be inscribed on their walls down to this day. The records of modern missions show that this is the way in which the dark continents of Asia and Africa are even now being illuminated. In these discussions of last year and this I am arguing that every new branch of genuine literature and true science should be placed in our curriculum, but I also demand that the best old studies which have stood the test of time should be retained, such as the Greek language and literature and the Bible. Withdraw Christianity from our colleges and we have taken away one of the vital forces which have given life and body to our higher education.

The typical university recommended by the President of Harvard is denominated *Unsectarian*. Unsectarian is at best a negative phrase; excluding much, but including nothing fitted to attract the mind. Over the gates of this model university might be written, "All knowledge imparted here except religious." It will be explained to the Freshman as he enters by the knowing ones, his seniors:

"Physical laws are taught here, gravitation, chemical affinity, conservation of energy, but it is utterly beyond our sphere to explain the relation of law to God or the law which binds man to his Maker. All kinds of literature are taught here: Anacreon, Latin satirists describing Roman vices, Rabelais, French novels and plays, but not the now antiquated Hebrew Scriptures or the discourses of the Galilean. Wycherly, Fielding, Smollet, Byron and Swinburne are favorites here, but the books of Job, Moses and Isaiah are out of date. Hume is studied here, and Voltaire and Rousseau and Tom Paine; but we are considerably above and beyond the narrow Jewish

“reasonings of Paul or the sentiment of John, and we find  
“Butler’s Analogy wearisome. We admire all forms of lit-  
“erature, but we never think of looking into sermons and  
“hymns; they are sectarian. Music in the highest is cul-  
“tivated here, but it is to give pleasure to ourselves, and  
“we do not employ it in the service of God.”

If religion is not honored in a college, any one acquainted with human nature, and with the present tendencies of opinion, can easily perceive what will be the prevailing spirit among the students. Positive religious belief being left out by the wise heads of the colleges, will be regarded as antiquated and effete, like the superstitions of ages past. It cannot create the interest which the retained studies do, and it will be looked on as belonging to the past and having no place in these enlightened times. With this spirit abroad the floating sentiments in the air will crystallize into the ice of Agnosticism with all its chilling and deadly influence; and the great body of the young men will settle down into the conviction that nothing can be known of God, of the world above or the world to come.

Even in such a state of things there would be some thoroughly drilled at home in the old faith who would still adhere to it. It may be farther allowed that as men’s souls cannot live in an utterly creedless state, any more than their bodies can live in a vacuum, so there will be times when there will come bursts of religious feeling, probably of a debasing form, and liable to die out speedily, like the burning of straw, leaving only ashes behind. Still the prevailing spirit of the place would be that of religious indifference. This would be apt to spread from college to college, from the unwillingness of Professors, now become so common, to have nothing to do with anything but the teaching of their own branches, to have nothing to do with the

morals of the students, and from the desire of young men to be free from all restraint. If I am not misinformed, there are colleges—happily as yet only a few—where such a spirit is abroad.

Surely there is some risk in withdrawing from our educational institutions this power, which has so strengthened them in the past. Thinking minds may well consider what would be the effect of sending out into society a few hundred agnostics every year, first to chill the atmosphere around them and then to oppose those grand philanthropic and missionary efforts which are one of the glories of our country.

II. We have now to view religion in its influence on the individual student. This is equally important. Indeed, it is only by its power over individuals that it comes to sway the community.

It is when they are at college that the character of students is commonly formed for life. How important in this world of good and evil that every good influence should be brought to bear upon them: models for them to copy, hopes to cheer them, inducements to lead them to excellence. I am sure that the great body of fathers and mothers, sensitively anxious about the welfare of their children, would wish it to be so. All true Christians believe that faith in a God and Saviour is the most potent force which can be brought to bear upon the young, to lift them above themselves, and above the selfish and sensual world. Every thoughtful man sees that means should be employed by those who have young men committed to them, to lead them to believe in high virtues which lift them above the meanness and the selfishness of the world. Under such training kindly administered, multitudes have been saved from the vices into which they might otherwise have fallen. Many have thus been led under inspiring power to devote them-



seives to high ends, which they have followed through life, and diffused around a happy, perhaps a holy, influence. Every college should send forth yearly a body of men intended for the ministry of the Word, and a number of missionaries to carry the glad tidings of the love of God to the ends of the earth. "Whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, if there be any praise," all young men in our colleges should be taught to "think on these things."

"Is life worth living?" In this age many are asking this question more earnestly than has been done since the declining ages of the Roman empire, when the old faith was passing away and the new faith had not been accepted. It is being put in the present day in every college by thoughtful youths as they look out on the world before them, which seems like an agitated and broken sea, and they wonder how they are to launch out upon it. The inquiry is made most anxiously by those who, as they start in life, are met with buffetings and disappointments. They then ask, "What profit hath a man of all his labor wherein he laboreth under the sun?" And they have to say, "All is vanity and a striving after wind" (Ecc. i:14, new version). This question, I know, is put in Princeton, and I trust we can give an answer to it. This question is put in Harvard, whether the President of the college knows it or not. Agnosticism has no answer to it, and I know that many a heart, in consequence, is crushed with anguish till feelings more bitter than tears are wrung from it. The ordinary college studies cannot answer the question. I have been standing up for Greek having a high place in colleges, but Greek says it is not in me to do this. Mathematics, in their place, are the

most certain of all departments of knowledge, but they say it is beyond our province to give peace to the soul. Philosophy, with all its depths, says it is not in me. I hold that at these critical periods of life, those who have to instruct youth should have an answer to give fitted to satisfy the anxious and despondent, and on which they may rest.

I am prepared to maintain that the influence of the literature and science taught in our colleges is, upon the whole, for good—for good morally as well as intellectually. They tend to refine the mind, and to create higher tastes and aspirations. But, after all, they do not reach down into the deepest depths of the heart whence are the issues of life. They do not speak to the conscience, which discerns between good and evil; they do not sway the motives and form the character, as religion is competent to do. Faith in God and Christ and spiritual truth can see that life is worth living, places before us glorious ends and useful works, and sets the young man forth on a life of self-sacrifice, of love and benevolence.

I am quite aware that "no external authority can make any one religious." But I believe as well that no external authority can make one a great Greek or Mathematical or even English scholar. But acknowledging all this, you require Greek, you require Mathematics and English as binding studies in the entrance to the college. Do in religion as you do in Greek and Mathematics. Use means to allure young men to all these studies. Present them in an attractive light, teach them thoroughly, show them that they are useful, that they are elevating, and I have great confidence that the issue will be good.

I have laid down the principles on which, I think, a college should be regulated and governed. I am now to examine by their light the scheme proposed this evening.

The author of the paper read allows the principle that there may be provision made for religion in colleges. "Daily prayers can be maintained in such a college, with attendance either required or voluntary." He cannot consistently object, and I believe he does not object on principle, to religion having a place in a college. But if it is to have a place, it should, as the President argues as to college instruction generally, be clear and unmistakable. I object to its being merely tolerated, or having an ambiguous position, as if the college was afraid of it or ashamed of it, and wished to confine it as much as possible. If this is done the question will be asked, as it is asked, why strive to keep up religious services, and the students will say it is time we were done with it, for it is a farce.

I believe that religion can have an honored and a useful place in all our colleges if the colleges are in earnest. The great-body of them have had this in the past, and I believe can have it in the future. Why should they give up this prestige which we have inherited from our fathers? Why should the rising generation be placed in a worse position in regard to religion than their ancestors, while in all other learning they are more favorably situated? If religion is beneficent, and if it be taught, let us get all the benefits from it we can, as we do from all other branches.

At Harvard, as I understand, attendance at prayers is required not every morning, but several times a week. There is no regular preaching on the Sabbaths during the day. For a few months in spring there is public worship, not compulsory, on the Sabbath evening. The President did me the honor to ask me to preach on one of these occasions. There was a full church, but not half of those attending were students; the majority seemed to be people from Cambridge. Seats are taken, as we have been told, in six

places of worship belonging to different denominations, for those who choose to occupy them.

So far as I can see there will be no attempt to drive religion out of the college, but it looks as if some were preparing to let it die out. Already upwards of 800 students have petitioned that prayers be given up, and the Professors, it is reported, have concurred with them. It must be a difficult matter to keep up religious services with such a state of popular sentiment. It looks already as if religion were a vanishing quantity. In the eyes of students it appears as it were waxing old and ready to perish. Downward steps have been taken, which by the impetus given must go on in a descent into a lower depth.

These dozen university sermons serve, I believe, a good purpose. They allow the students, if they are inclined, to hear the eloquent sermons of some of our best preachers. But they cannot accomplish the end served by regular pastoral discourses preached from Sabbath to Sabbath and suited to the wants and state of the audience. The President is ready to allow prayers in a college, "because there is no opportunity for doctrinal teaching at prayers." I am not sure that this added reason is a good one. If men have no underlying belief in truth, they will not be apt to continue in prayer, or their devotions will be dead, and, therefore, cold, and be offered only fitfully on rare occasions.

Seats are provided in several of the churches, but there is no means provided of securing that the great body of the students take advantage of these privileges. There are rigid examinations required in all other branches, which all but compel a daily attendance on recitations, but no surveillance is taken in regard to the observance of religious duties. With no other arrangement than this, those most in need of the benign influence of religion, in guiding and in guarding

at this crisis of their immortal life, would be without it, for they have no taste for it, and they turn away from what they fear would condemn them.

The students, in their petition for deliverance, urge that with no compulsion attendance at prayers and at church would be a sign of sincerity. I ask them, would such a motive secure attention to other branches—say mathematics? Would anybody give us credit for good sense, or even sincerity, if we said: better have no examination of students in mathematics, as thereby they would the better show their taste for the study when they attend to it? It is one of the grand offices of a college to kindle a taste for all that is good and elevating, be it mathematics or be it religion, and to foster it when it is feeble. I regard it as wrong in a college to call students away from their parents, away from home influence, away from church influence, and then allow them to spend their Sabbaths as they please—in idleness or dissipation.

I find that my opponent has expressed this view more effectively than I have. He is represented in the public press as reading to the Unitarian Club a paper on "Secularization of Education, not a Rational End." He referred to the theory of some, that religion can well be left out of the public school system altogether, just as the study of algebra or English history might be omitted from a course of study. This course, he said, is approved by the current socialistic philosophy. The President said that, "while it was agreed on all sides that the fundamental rules of morality should be universally taught to the youth of the community, nobody has yet shown how it can be done apart from the sanctions of religion. There is no such thing," he said, "as a science of ethics. If morality is to be taught, religion must be taught with it." I am sorry to find the President

of a great college declaring that there is no science of ethics, whereas I hold there has been such a science since the time of Socrates and Aristotle. But I rejoice in his statement about the dependence of morality on religion. He is speaking of the national schools for children; but if religion be needful to morality among children under their fathers' and mothers' care, and that of ministers of religion, it is, if possible, still more required at the critical period of young men's lives when they are at college. He speaks: "But is this to be done without religious teaching?" No, probably by the teachers of geometry or geology, who would be going out of their way in attempting it. There is a risk that colleges left without religious, may be left also without moral, teaching.

It will be an ominous day when one or more of our great colleges are brought to declare openly: "We are to give up trying to maintain religion in a college; we are unwilling to attempt it; nay, more, it cannot be done." Yet we have seriously to contemplate such an issue as possibly or probably, as sooner or later, coming in our State colleges, and in some others. Beginning in a very limited number of colleges, we may fear its extension from two causes—from the desire of young men to be freed from all restraints, and from the growing indisposition of young Professors to take any charge of the morals of young men.

We may suppose that there is a college in which all attempts to give religion a place are abandoned. What would be the effect? Would religion, therefore, die out in the country? I believe no such thing. Christianity is founded on a rock, and the gates of hell shall not be able to prevail against it.

I believe that the abandonment of religion would be a loss to the college. It would thereby deprive itself of a most

beneficent power which it at present has. There would be a loss felt even by those too proud to acknowledge it. If religion supplies motives to lead young men to live morally, why should not colleges take advantage of it? We cannot too often quote the statement, "Nobody knows how to teach morality effectively without religion." No bond will connect students and Professors so closely as the religion of love. A mere savant in a college may, after all, be a narrow-minded man—believing only in mechanism. A mere classical scholar may be a pedant, believing only in words. Nothing will enlarge these men's minds so effectively as belief in the grand truths of religion.

Religion can and must be maintained in a college, and this, whether college authorities do or do not undertake it. I believe that colleges can do it better than any external body. The college instructors have readier and closer access to students than any others can. I do not hold that every Professor in our colleges should be required to teach religion. Some otherwise good instructors may not have the taste or the peculiar aptitude for the work. But surely, in every college in a country where the great body of the people profess to be Christians, there will be some whose heart is in the work—President, or Professors, or Tutors, willing to do it "for love's sake." What I ask is, that the colleges arrange that this be done, always heartily and honestly, and not in mere name and form. I am convinced that the great body of parents wish it. Even those who have no religion themselves, shrink from the idea of their children being placed beyond all the restraints, the hopes, the consolations of a "pure religion before God and the Father." And if this can be done in a college, it should be done.

But even though it is not done by colleges, even when it is not done by them, it has to be done, and must be done.

The churches of Christ, with zealous individuals, will have to do it. They will feel an awful responsibility lying upon them. Our young men cannot be allowed to grow up without a knowledge of God and of Christ. The churches must and will hasten to take up the work. They will give their best thought to the thorough organization and execution of it, and will feel that among all their varied offices, they have not a greater than this. They will feel that they labor under disadvantages; they may not be able to reach all the young men; but they will use all the means within their power. Should Harvard declare its inability, then the Congregational churches, the Episcopal churches, the Methodist, the Baptist churches must earnestly engage in the work. In faithfulness to their Master, they cannot allow our promising young men to collect from all parts of the country, to acquire all other knowledge, but no knowledge of God and the Saviour he has provided. I will be satisfied if this discussion helps to awaken the churches to realize their deep responsibility in this matter.

At the age at which I have arrived, I cannot be much longer engaged in these discussions. I am glad and grateful that I have been privileged to defend two good causes, closely connected on the one hand with the highest scholarship, and the other the immortal interests of the young men of this generation. I quote once more the words of my opponent, and allow him to close: "This is the interest of the family and of morality. Nobody knows how to teach morality effectively without religion."










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