

The Formation and Development of Liberal Education in Colonial Colleges of British North America

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Abstract

American higher education began with Harvard College in 1636. There were nine colonial colleges in North America before the American Revolution. As the initial stage of American higher education, these colleges not only inherited many traditions of British universities, but they also carried out many reforms to meet their own conditions. Although the purpose to build these colleges at the first place is to train clergies, however, with the economic and social development of British North America, these colleges turned to cultivate all kinds of professional talents to meet the needs of the economic and social development, which contributed to the formation of liberal education in colonial time. This paper tries to sort out the formation and development of liberal education in British North America.

Keywords

Liberal education; British North America; Higher education.

1. Introduction

Although the history of the United States is not long, it has formed a highly developed modern educational system. When it comes to the causes of its educational system, many people attribute it to the developed economy, strong financial resources, advanced facilities, relaxed environment and first-class talents of the United States. In some sense, such a view is reasonable. However, from a deeper point of view, all these are not so much the prerequisites and conditions for the great success of modern education in the United States, but rather the result of the long-standing emphasis of American society on education. This tradition can be traced back to the colonial period before the foundation of the United States. In 1607, Britain established the first North American colonial stronghold in Jamestown, Virginia. Over the next hundreds of years, a large number of European (mainly British) immigrants came to settle along the Atlantic coast of North America and established 13 British colonies. These colonists brought religious beliefs, educational traditions and bourgeois ideology from Europe. Although the United States was still in the pre-industrial era, with a low level of economic development and poor conditions in all respects, immigrants from Europe still overcame many difficulties and started education vigorously. Finally, Harvard College, the first university, was founded in 1636. Although there were only nine colleges and universities were founded by the colonists before the Revolution, the development of these colleges laid a preliminary foundation for the future direction of American higher education.

2. The forming conditions of liberal education in Colonial Colleges of British North American

2.1 Religious needs are the driving force for liberal education

From the early seventeenth Century to the independence of the United States, most of the colonists in the British colonies were Protestants. They emigrated from Europe to North America mainly to escape religious persecution, pursue freedom of belief, and seek a paradise to realize religious ideals. How to establish the dominant position of Christianity in the New World, maintain the purity of Christianity and ensure the continuity of faith, are the main goals of those early immigrants.

Protestants believed that the Bible was the source of faith and the Supreme authority, only educated people could understand it, one's comprehension to a large extent determined his level of religious cultivation. Therefore, reading and writing ability were the preconditions for becoming the children of God. Tocqueville pointed out that in the United States, it was the religion that enlightened people. Proportionally speaking, among the settlers on the coast of New England, there were far more civilized people than any other country in Europe today. Most of them were well educated, and many of them were renowned for their brilliance in Europe. In their view, education was the most important means to achieve the goal of training clergy and literate educators.

Based on this understanding and concern, in order to cultivate qualified senior religious personnel, establish a stable and high-quality clergy team, those immigrants put the establishment of higher education institutions on the agenda. In view of the fact that the purpose of the school was to teach the Bible and to train believers and clergymen, the Puritan school was religious in nature from the very beginning. It has been recorded that "they founded religious schools to educate the people so that the educated could read and understand the Bible by themselves." "To cultivate clergymen and propagate the theory of the sect through the establishment of a higher religious colleges, so that the religion will continue forever."

2.2 The formation of the academic legal person system in the colonial colleges

University as a corporate association was a European tradition. Since Harvard College was founded, it had gone through hundreds of years of changes, and had become a very mature system. The establishment of colonial colleges basically adopted this European tradition. From a long-term point of view, the significance of the establishment of the academic legal person system in the United States lay in the independence of colleges from the external authority (churches and colonial governments) in a sense of legislation, which provided a basic institutional guarantee for the autonomy of higher education institutions. Therefore, despite the ups and downs of American history and the crisis of survival and development faced by colonial colleges during this period, colonial colleges had always been invincible. The reason cannot be found only in the will of the founders and administrators of the colleges, the belief in education, the pursuit of knowledge and other spiritual aspects. Without the law and the strong guarantee of the system, it was very difficult to maintain the survival and development of the colleges. Academic legal person system not only effectively guaranteed the survival of the nine colonial colleges, but also became the basic system followed by American higher education institutions, and laid the legal foundation for the development of American higher education. Moreover, the academic legal person system also mapped out relevant principles for American higher education. Edwin D. Duryea argued that an important consequence of the academic legal person system was the emergence of a basic concept of higher education being independent from the government but responsible for it, which is ultimately the ideological premise for the continuing balance between institutional autonomy and accountability in American higher education.

3. The development of liberal education in the British North American Colonial Academy

Generally speaking, the history of American higher education begins at Harvard College. In 1633, Puritan John Eliot, a graduate of the Jesuit College of Cambridge University, wrote to the Massachusetts Parliament a proposal that aroused public debate, proposing the establishment of an academy in the Gulf of Massachusetts. In 1636, under the leadership of 32-year-old Governor Harry Fanny, the Massachusetts Court met in Magdalen Hall. The Congress passed a legislative resolution to establish a college and appropriated 400 pounds for the construction of the college. On November 15, 1637, the Legislative Council decided to change the name of the New Town Construction College to Cambridge College. On September 14, 1638, John Harvard, a Puritan pastor who graduated from Emmanuel College at Cambridge University, died of tuberculosis and donated half of his fortune to the new college before he died. It was a great asset at the time. "To commemorate Harvard's righteous deeds, the Massachusetts Grand Court on March 13, 1639, decided to rename Cambridge College as

Harvard College." The establishment of Harvard College marked the beginning of American higher education and opened a new era in the history of American cultural education.

In 1693, 57 years after Harvard College was founded, the second tobacco-producing Virginia college, William Mary College appeared. The earliest proposer of the college was James Blair, the leader of the Anglican Church. In 1686 he proposed to the governor that he should establish an academy to train priests to save the soul of the Virginians, but the proposal was shelved. A few years later, Blair went to London in 1693 to ask William III, who had succeeded in the Glorious Revolution, and his wife, Mary II, to grant a royal charter to the new academy. Then, the academy was named William II. Mary College, Blair was also appointed as the lifelong Dean of the college.

John Davenport, a pioneer of Yale College and one of the founders of the New Haven Colony in Connecticut, was a pious Puritan who graduated from Oxford University in the United Kingdom. He resigned as governor of Harvard College because he was dissatisfied with the progressive advocacy of liberal theology by Harvard College instead of sticking to Puritan positions. Leaving school in 1638, he advocated the establishment of a new and more holy church school at the mouth of the Quebec River in New Haven to train clergymen and officials so that the spiritual flame of Puritanism could be passed on forever. On October 15, 1701, the Connecticut State Assembly passed a bill entitled "Establishment of a School for Freedom". In 1718, when the teaching building under construction suffered from a shortage of funds, the trustees of the college appealed to Erihu Yale, a wealthy East Indian company official, for assistance in providing some support to the college. To express gratitude, the college custodian changed the name of Union College to Yale College.

4. The main characteristics of colonial colleges in British North America

4.1 The classicism of curriculum

Students' learning contents and curriculum were mainly traditional classics. The proficiency of classical languages used by students was the criterion for admission to colonial colleges. It was evidenced by the formal admission conditions announced by Harvard College in 1642.

"Students can read the works of Cicero or first-rate Latin writers like him on the spot; they can recite or write poetry and prose improvisely in pure Latin; they can correctly handle variations of verbs and nouns in Greek according to grammatical rules, and only those with the above conditions can be admitted to the college. William Marie College stipulated that "applicants must be 15 years old at least. If they have not studied classical languages before, they must study Latin and Greek in the Preparatory Department of the College." Yale's admission requirements were in line with Harvard's, and students could "analyze Latin and Greek works skillfully and gracefully, and write accurate and elegant Latin." In addition to some theoretical courses, the colonial colleges of the 17th century also set up three academic activities, lectures, speeches and debates, designed to train students in logical thinking and eloquence, which were highly valued and respected in North American societies where the discovery of philosophical and theological truths was the highest value.

4.2 Strong religious color

In early colonial colleges, religion was an indispensable part of students' life. The administrators of the colonial colleges believed that only when students understood Jesus could they complete their studies leading to wisdom and undertake the sacred mission of missionary work. All colonial colleges therefore stipulated: "Students must regularly pray for wisdom for themselves and attend church prays in the morning and evening; on Sabbath days, most of their time is devoted to prays and theological studies; their words and deeds must be strictly in accordance with Christian moral maxims."

Therefore, theology, as a compulsory course for students of all colonial colleges, was also considered to be the most important subject to lay the foundation of their philosophy. The "moral philosophy" course taught by principals or famous theology professors was generally offered in colonial colleges. It combined Christian doctrine, rationality with science, trying to cultivate students' correct thinking habits, cultural concepts and value orientation. In order to make students qualified clergymen after graduation, these colonial colleges often organized students to participate in various religious

activities after class, familiarizing themselves with religious etiquette, and Latin, Greek and Hebrew were the contents that students must learn to preach and study scriptures. At the same time, the religious atmosphere was full of students in all aspects of life, most of the colleges were scattered around the churches of all sizes, and even some teaching buildings of the colleges had the architectural styles with obvious religious characteristics.

5. Conclusion

British North American liberal education originated from religion and was born out of the British higher education tradition. In less than 200 years, with gradual steps, it has basically completed the evolution process from religion to secularism. It is a highlight of American colonial liberal education that adapts to local conditions, not stick to stereotypes, and it is brave in innovation, and it survives and develops in the interaction with social economy and market demand. Loose government management, vague and vacuum of law, coexistence and disputes of various sects, and differences in economic and social structures among regions led to the diversity of liberal education in colonial times. Independence and competition brought vitality to liberal education in the colonial period. It can be seen that the development and uniqueness of American liberal education today are not isolated. It has its historical origin. It seems that people can see the origin of the development of American liberal education in the colonial period. Perhaps this is the historical reason why American higher education is now at the forefront of the world and pushes forward the rapid development of the American economy.

Subject Source

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