

“ABRILLIANT GALAXY OF TALENT”

Modern higher education in England and Scotland was born in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries largely out of Unitarian stock, out of Unitarian ideas promoted by Unitarian tutors and students. The established and prestigious universities of Oxford and Cambridge required a religious test of orthodoxy for admission as students or teachers. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, were bubbling up with new exploratory thought, unorthodox ideas in religion and then in the arts and sciences. At their pinnacle were Sir Isaac Newton, John Locke, and John Milton, towering figures who had developed a Unitarian orientation in their understanding of the universe and humanity and put their expanding ideas in print, before there yet were any Unitarian churches to connect them spiritually with others of like mind. Along with them were ministers of religion, ejected in 1662 from the established Anglican Church for their unorthodox ideas. These were often men of high university attainment, now banished from Church and University, who felt called to provide university education to Nonconformists, such as liberal English Presbyterians, who evolved by the eighteenth century into Unitarians. They founded a score of Dissenting Academies, which revolutionized education.

The nonconformist academies were be open to all, theological students and laity with interest in new realms of study, especially the natural sciences, and the beginnings of what we would later call the social sciences and business administration. One principal of a college descendent from these free academies, Dr. Herbert McLachlan, characterized them for “their liberal interpretation of the scope and character of education, their freedom in the use and criticism of text-books, their toleration of different types of ecclesiastical opinion, their scruples about subscription to dogmatic formulae, and their opening of seminaries to laymen as well as to students of divinity.” This rejected and isolated branch of education in England and Scotland quickly became the seat of creative thinking in gave birth to modern education with its emphasis on stimulating open-ended thinking rather than imposing established traditional thought. They inaugurated the proliferation of realms of study leading to degrees in new disciplines, as physics and chemistry. Such new studies drew students from orthodox universities. The students and tutors increasingly identified themselves as Unitarian, and by the eighteenth century Unitarianism was the predominant religious orientation of the scholarly community at these academies. Some experimental areas of study proved ephemeral, but the breadth of study in modern universities, now including Oxford and Cambridge, originated in the Dissenting Academies.

The first Dissenting Academy was that of Carmarthen, founded by 1672. Soon came Taunton, Exeter, Hoxton (which educated the first Unitarian minister in Norfolk, the Rev. Harry Toulmin), Findern, Northampton, Daventry (which educated the Rev. Joseph Priestley who converted Thomas Jefferson to Unitarianism), Horsey, and others. Some of the Dissenting Academies seemed lax in discipline, such as those at Warrington, Manchester, and Hackney. Yet when young people of differing thought and professional interest were gathered together in the freedom of a liberal approach to education, the exchange of ideas was explosive. They were united, writes McLachlan, by their “inherited zeal for emancipation from every bond, civil and religious, and by their belief in freedom as the necessary prelude to the acquisition of truth and the only firm foundation of government.” They led the way to the modern world.

Ref: H. McLachlan, *The Unitarian Movement in the Religious Life of England*, vol. 1: *Its Contribution to Thought and Learning, 1700-1900* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1934), pp. 71-97.

Will Frank