PROVIDENCE PILGRIMAGE

Convocation in The Baptist
MEETING HOUSE

In Honor of The Northern Baptist Convention
in Boston

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I am happy to take an official part in welcoming you to
this shrine, for in a classical case of yoking two dis-
similar and disparate things together, it was built “for
the publick Worship of Almighty GOD and also for hold-
ing 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 Uni-
versity 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 RECANTED,
ENJOYING AND GRANTING BELL, TEMPLE, AND STEEPLE.

The University would not have been conceived, a cen-
tury 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. Free-
dom to worship God in accordance with individual con-
viction 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 Irrespon-
sibles, “Great numbers of men in various parts of the world

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Providence, Rhode Island. He is a Methodist. This article is
the address delivered by President Wriston on the occasion of
the pilgrimage of Northern Convention delegates to Providence
prior to the Boston Convention.]

Providence Pilgrima

By Henry M. Wriston

wish passionately and even violently to give up the lab-
or of liberty and to surrender their wills and 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 gen-
eration remains to all generations that follow. But free-
doms with every individual, and it is not re-born with
successors; it must be achieved anew, generation
generation. Forgetfulness of this distinction leads pe-
to forget also that not only is “eternal vigilance . . .
price of liberty,” as an early patriot said, but ren-
persistent, unflagging effort must be expended just to
the ground that has been gained previously; ever int-
ense exertion must be made if the world is to prog-

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

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

Present-Day Clash

In contrast, Russian dialectic materialism, upon
the Soviet tyranny is erected, is intellectually

definable, and explicit. It is, therefore, relatively es-
define the issue between true democracy and one
Communism. If one is not frightened away from the
by current hysteria, and if one is ready to fact
facts, he can learn exactly what the Soviets aim to
the world. When that course is taken, the tension be
Communism and Christianity is revealed as not
natural, but inevitable. Communism regards the indi-
as irrelevant—as do all totalitarians; Christianity:
the individual dominant.

Politically, and even economically, it may prove fe
for the democracies and the Soviets to live in the
world, moving along parallel lines, without phy-
fighting. It may be possible, we are not sure. But
absolutely impossible for the two systems to live in
harmony so long as the concept of freedom of min
heart, epitomized in the University and the Meeting I
remains a vital part of the American heritage. P
make compromises, and economics is a flexib
strument; freedom has no such ductile quality. The

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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 pow- politics, economic rivalries, and social disturbances, we have come to misunderstand toleration. Tolerating is or of the most important by-products of true intellectual or 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. True enemies he identified—greed, pride, and the rest—which 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—things which Jesus never condoned. He distinguishes 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 wave 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. Liberal 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 alone 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.