

# THE ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY

## *A Documentary Source Problem*

One of the most enduring myths in American history is the belief that the Puritans fled to America in search of religious liberty. However, this belief is only half true. The Puritans were strict religious people who believed in a sovereign God whom all must obey. To serve their God, and to create a more godly society, the Puritans moved from England to the wilderness surrounding Massachusetts Bay. There they hoped to make a covenant, an agreement among themselves and with God, in order to create a civil and religious society based on the Bible and dedicated to worshipping God in the "correct" manner. They believed God would bless and protect them as His chosen people, as long as they all kept God's commandments. But if anyone in the society broke them, the covenant with God would be broken and the entire community would suffer.

To establish such a society, the civil and religious authorities worked together to insure an ordered and saintly community. The governor and judges were to keep the society peaceful, enforce the laws and punish wrongdoers. The churchmen were preachers, spiritual advisers who interpreted God's will for the congregation of believers. Therefore, any political problem that threatened the stability of the society was also a religious problem, and any religious transgression that threatened the covenant with God was also a political wrong. In other words, a crime was a sin and a sin was a crime. In such a system, run by religious zealots, any minor religious disagreement could easily be blown into a major crisis that could split the society. Such a crisis was the antinomian controversy of 1636-7, in which Anne Hutchinson and her followers were banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

The Puritans believed in predestination, that God chose a person at birth either to receive God's grace of eternal life in heaven or to suffer the fiery torment of hell. Grace was a gift from God, and a person could not earn it by doing good works, good actions, on earth. He or she was already pre-destined for heaven or hell. Also, they could never know for certain their destination, whether they were one of the "elect" bound for heaven, or the damned going the other direction. However, the Puritan ministers believed that only the elect could live a saintly life, so they accepted outward appearances and good actions as clues that a person was one of the chosen.

Anne Hutchinson and her followers disagreed. They said that good actions were not a sign of salvation. Instead, they believed that a person could know God's plan for them only if they had a direct religious experience of God, a revelation that He had chosen them as one of the "elect". And once God had revealed it to them, their outward appearance was not important. They didn't even need to obey the religious laws. In other words, it didn't matter to God how they looked or acted, because He had already given His grace, his salvation into Heaven, to whomever He wanted. Therefore, a person's relationship with God was much more important than the ministers' church sermons or the laws. And that's why the Puritan ministers called Mrs. Hutchinson an antinomian, "a person against the laws".

The cast of characters in the antinomian controversy was large. The most important were Anne Hutchinson, the leader of the antinomian Puritans, and two orthodox Puritans: a Mr. Wilson and John Winthrop, a founding member of the Massachusetts Bay Company and former governor of the colony.

From the following documents write an interpretive history of the antinomian controversy in Massachusetts. Assume that you are a historian writing a history of the U.S., and that you have 2-1/2 pages (600-800 words) to devote to this controversy. You have decided to describe it because it is a good magnifying glass for examining Puritan society. Explain the sequence of events clearly so that your readers will understand them. Also, polish your writing style carefully for publication!

In analyzing the documents, answer the following questions:

1. What was Winthrop's view of society? What type of man was he?
2. How did the concept of the covenant affect the Court's dealings with disunity in the colony and the "troublemakers" who caused it?
3. Were there political problems in the colony before the controversy? How did they affect the political division of the colony? Where were the majority of Mrs. Hutchinson's supporters located? Where were Winthrop's? Is this difference important? Why was the General Court election of 1637 held in Newtown rather than in Boston?

4. Was Mrs. Hutchinson's sex important in the case? Did the court act too harshly with Mrs. Hutchinson? What was the court trying to do?
5. How did Hutchinson's belief in personal revelations from God threaten the entire Puritan idea of their society and its purpose? What did it do to the role of the ministers?
6. The term "antinomian" literally means "one who is against the law". Does it fairly describe Anne Hutchinson and her supporters?

#### DOCUMENT #1

Alden T. Vaughn (ed.), The Puritan Tradition in America 1620-1730, 1972.

[In 1630, while at sea bound for America, John Winthrop delivered his speech, "A Model of Christian Charity", describing the type of society that the Puritans desired to create in the wilderness:]

"God Almighty in His most holy and wise providence hath so disposed of the condition of mankind as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity, others in subjection...

"Every [person] has need of others...in the bond of brotherly affection. All parts of this body are united [in Christ] and must partake of each other's strength and infirmity, joy and sorrow....The care of the society must [outweigh] all individual concerns...

"We have besought God of favor and blessing. Now if the Lord shall please to hear us, and bring us in peace to the place we desire [in the New World] then He hath ratified this covenant and will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it. But if we neglect them and seek great things for ourselves and our posterity, the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us....If we will not obey, but worship other gods, our pleasures and profits, we shall surely perish..."

#### DOCUMENT #2

Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence Johnson was a Puritan minister who wrote a history of the New England Plantation in which he attempted to show the specific signs of God's favor (wonder-working providence) in the development of the colony:

Chap. IV

"How the people in Christ's Churches are to behave themselves.

"Now you His People, who are picked out by His providence to pass this Western Ocean for this honorable service, beware you not call weak ones to office, lest they be lifted up with pride...Yes, such will be the fantastic madness of some, if you do not pay heed, that silly women laden with diverse lusts will be held in higher esteem than those honored by Christ, imbued with power and authority from Him to preach... Cast out such members as walk disorderly..."

#### DOCUMENT #3

Thomas Hutchinson, History of Massachusetts Bay, 1770s. Hutchinson was a historian and the last royal governor of the colony of Massachusetts before the Revolution:

"Mrs. Hutchinson 'was well-beloved and all the faithful embraced her discussions and blessed God for her fruitful discourses'. So much respect seems to have increased her natural vanity...She advanced opinions which involved the colony in disputes [which would have] produced ruin to both church and state. The vigilance of some, like Mr. Winthrop, prevented and turned the ruin from the country upon herself and many of her family and friends."

#### DOCUMENT #4

John Winthrop, Journal, 1636.

"One Mrs. Hutchinson, a woman of a ready wit and bold spirit, brought over with her [from England] two dangerous errors: 1. That the Holy Ghost dwells in a justified [saved] person. 2. That no saintly outward appearance or good action can help to indicate to us that we are saved."

#### DOCUMENT #5

Johnson, Wonder-Working Providence, Chap. XLII

"Of sad effects of the pitiful and erroneous Doctrines.

"The number of these infectious persons increasing now, having drawn a great party to their side, they grew bold and dare question the sound and wholesome truths delivered in public by the Ministers of Christ. The fogs of error increase from their own conceited revelations...The weaker sex has prevailed so far that they set up a Priest of their own Profession and Sex."

#### DOCUMENT # 6

Winthrop's Journal, Jan. 19, 1637.

"A general fast was kept in all the churches. The occasion was the miserable estate of the churches in Germany; the calamities upon our native country [England], the bishops making havoc in the churches, putting down the faithful ministers and advancing popish ceremonies and doctrines; the plague raging exceedingly, and famine and sword threatening them; the dangers of those in Connecticut and of ourselves by the Indians; and the dissensions in our churches."

#### DOCUMENT #7

Hutchinson, The History of Massachusetts Bay.

"Towards the end of the year [1636] religious disunity became more violent...The people of Boston in general were in favor of Mrs. Hutchinson and Mr. Vane, the governor; the rest of the towns, in general, for Mr. Winthrop. At a session of the court in March, it was moved that the court of elections for 1637 should not be held in Boston but in Cambridge. It was carried for removal."

#### DOCUMENT #8

Criminal sentences of the antinomians from Records of the General Court of Massachusetts, Nov. 2, 1637.

"Mr. John Wheelwright [friend of Anne Hutchinson], being formerly convicted of contempt and sedition [treachery], and now...being to the disturbance of the civil peace, is by the Court disfranchised [deprived of citizenship] and banished, having 14 days to settle his affairs..."

"Mr. John Coggeshall, being convicted for disturbing the public peace, was disfranchised and enjoined not to speak anything to disturb the public peace, on pain of banishment.

"Mr. William Aspinwall, being convicted for signing a petition being a seditious libel...and for his insolent carriage, is disfranchised and banished."

[Following was a list of 14 others punished for following Mrs. Hutchinson.]

#### DOCUMENT #9

The examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court of Cambridge, Nov. 6, 1637.

[Having disfranchised those antinomians who had signed a petition defending Wheelwright, the Court turned to deal with the instigator of dissension within the colony, Mrs. Hutchinson. Yet, since she had not been guilty of an overt act of sedition, such as signing a petition, the Court had to find broader grounds on which to try her.]

Mr. Winthrop, Governor Mrs. Hutchinson, you are called here as one of those who have troubled the peace of the commonwealth and the churches here; you are known to be a woman who has a great share in the promoting of those opinions that are a cause of this trouble. You have spoken diverse things that are very prejudicial to the honor of the churches and ministers thereof...

Mrs. Hutchinson I am called here to answer before you but I hear no crimes laid to my charge...

Gov. This you did: harbor and countenance those that are in this [antinomian] faction.

Mrs. H. That's a matter of conscience, Sir.

Gov. Your conscience you must keep or it must be kept for you...Your opinions being known to be different from the word of God may seduce many simple souls...

[Finding the foregoing path of prosecution to be merely speculation and not proof of a crime, the Court tried a new tack and tried to prove that Mrs. Hutchinson had slandered the ministers of the colony.]

Mr. Weld I remember she said we were not able ministers of the New Testament.

Mr. Phillips She likewise said that we were not able ministers of the New Testament...

Mr. Shepard Now I remember that she said that we were not able ministers of the New Testament...

Mrs. H. I bless the Lord; He hath let me see which was the clear ministry and which the wrong...Now if you condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be true, I must commit myself unto the Lord.

Mr. Newel How do you know that that was the Spirit?

Mrs. H. How did Abraham know that it was God that bid him offer his son, being a breach of the sixth commandment?

Dep. Gov. By an immediate voice.

Mrs. H. So to me by an immediate revelation.

Dep. Gov. How! By an immediate revelation?

Mrs.H. By the voice of His own Spirit in my soul...You have power over my body but the Lord Jesus Christ hath power over my body and soul...and if you go on in this course you will bring a curse upon you and your posterity, and the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it...

Gov. The ground of all these disturbances are "revelations",...and that is the means by which she hath abused the country, that they shall look for revelations and are not bound to the ministry of the word...

Court We all consent with you...

Gov. The troublesomeness of her spirit and the danger of her course among us are not to be suffered. Therefore if Mrs. Hutchinson...is unfit for our society, and if it be the mind of the Court that she be banished, let them hold up their hands.

Gov. All but three.

Gov. Mrs. Hutchinson, the sentence of the Court you hear is that you are banished from out of our jurisdiction as being a woman not fit for our society, and are to be imprisoned till the Court shall send you away.

Mrs. H. I desire to know wherefore am I banished.

Gov. Say no more, the Court knows wherefore and is satisfied.

#### DOCUMENT #10

On two days in March, 1638, the Boston congregation met to decide whether Mrs. Hutchinson should be excommunicated from the church.

Mrs. Hutchinson I spoke rashly and unadvisedly. I do not allow the slighting of ministers, nor of the scriptures, nor anything that is set up by God...It was never in my heart to slight any man, but only that man should be kept in his own place and not set in the room of God...

Brother Wilson ...I believe there was another and greater cause [of your errors], and that is the slighting of God's faithful ministers, and condemning and crying down them as nobodies...I think it was to set up yourself in the Room of God above others, that you might be extolled and admired and followed...

Mr. Peters I commend this to your [Hutchinson's] consideration, that you have stepped out of place, you have been a husband rather than a wife, a preacher than a hearer, and a magistrate than a subject...

Brother Wilson I look upon her as a dangerous instrument of the devil, raised by Satan amongst us to raise up divisions and contentions and to take away hearts and affections one from another...Therefore we should sin against God if we should not put away from us so Evil a Woman, guilty of such foul Evils...

Question I desire to be satisfied in this: how the Church may proceed to excommunication, when the scripture says he that confesseth and forsaketh sin shall have mercy, and whether we should not bear with patience the contrary-minded.

Brother Wilson ...Though she hath made some show of repentance it does not seem to be cordial and sincere...The Church consenting to it, we will now proceed to Excommunication. Forasmuch as you, Mrs. Hutchinson, have highly transgressed and offended, and have drawn away many a poor soul and have upheld your revelation, and forasmuch as you have made a lie, therefore in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and in the name of the Church I do pronounce you not only worthy to be cast out, but I do cast you out; and in the name of Christ I do deliver you up to Satan, that you may learn no more to blaspheme, to seduce, to lie...Therefore I command you in the name of Christ Jesus and of this Church as a leper to withdraw yourself out of this Congregation; that as formerly you have despised and condemned the Holy Ordinances of God, and turned your backs on them, so now you may have no part in them nor benefit by them.