

A Woman on Trial

Once upon a time (but this is not a fairy tale), more than 350 years ago, an extraordinary woman named Anne Hutchinson so disturbed the first English settlers of this country that they put her on trial in one of the most fascinating court dramas of early American history. I decided to talk about this trial for three reasons: first, because Anne and her accusers were all Congregationalists and to learn more about them is to know more about our own past; second, because Anne dared to challenge entrenched male authority at a time when women entered church on Sunday by a separate door, sat on one side of the sanctuary by themselves, and acquiesced meekly to whatever the male leaders of the church demanded; and third, because the Massachusetts Bay Colony where the trial took place provides such a disturbing picture of theocracy, that form of government in an established religion makes the laws. The five books I have just read about that trial made me understand better than ever why separation of church and state is so important.

Let's set the stage for the trial by recalling those very first days in New England. A small group of Pilgrims, wanting a place where they could worship as they liked, had landed at Plymouth near the end of 1620, utterly exhausted after more than two months at sea in a ship meant for cargo rather than passengers. You know their story: how half died that winter and more would have died soon except for the help of friendly Indians in the neighborhood. Not long after, other settlers known as Puritans, began arriving around Boston. The Pilgrims and the Puritans were both dissatisfied with the Church of England, but they disagreed on how to change it. The

Puritans, so-called because they wanted to “purify” the Anglican Church, hoped to reform it from within rather than break away. But change went too slowly for some of them, who decided it was hopeless and that what they needed to do was separate and set up their own houses of worship. These people came to be called Separatists, for obvious reasons, but they were also known as Pilgrims because one of their ministers had called them that in a famous sermon. Eventually, both rebellious groups would together take upon themselves the name “Congregationalists” to signify their absolute insistence that each local church have total control over its own destiny.

Among the Puritans who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony was a Cambridge University lawyer named John Winthrop who would become the first governor of the Colony and play a leading role in the trial. Desperately eager to preserve a fragile government, he would eventually sacrifice tolerance toward people whose independent spirits he felt might create anarchy. Chief among them would be the woman named Anne Hutchinson, whom we can best understand by taking a look at how she grew up back in England as the daughter of a man who insisted that the Church of England, having broken from its Catholic heritage, should continue to make changes. When he charged the church with having failed to demand a well-educated and caring ministry, the Bishop of London responded with the worst insult he could think of. He called Anne’s father an “overbearing Puritan knave.” Anne’s father, in turn, called the Bishop of London an ass, an idiot and a

fool....and was booted out of the Established Church for his pains. Little wonder that his daughter came to believe passionately in the right of religious dissent and free speech.

As she grew up, Anne took care of one sibling after another, learning the skills that would make her a beloved nurse and midwife after she migrated to the American wilderness where medical skills were at a premium. Being a second mother as she grew up, and then cuddling 13 innocent-looking babies of her own after she married Will Hutchinson, she rebelled against the Church's doctrine that they were born in original sin. She also rebelled against the male chauvinism rampant in England during the early 17th century. Through the last half of the 16th century English women had watched their red-headed Queen Elizabeth face down the strongest men of Europe with her keen intellect and iron will, and had wondered why they were denied university education and membership in parliament. Many of them were drawn to the Puritan nonconformists and wrote tracts claiming that with proper training women should be quite as capable as men of entering the ministry, an idea at which the all-male hierarchy of the church trembled.

But when Elizabeth was succeeded in 1603 by James 1, women's hopes for greater freedom were squashed. Recognizing the King's strong hostility toward female independence, some of his male subjects began publishing tracts against uppity women. One of the most famous was published by Joseph Swetnam in 1615 and re-issued 10 times before it was finally made into a stage play. It's insulting title is too long to read, but in the tract Swetnam calls for submissive women and declares that the best possible wife would be a 17-

year-old virgin “flexible and bending, obedient and subject to do anything” her husband demanded. Women promptly fired back, using pseudonyms for safety’s sake but giving as good as they got. One directly addressed Swetnam’s tract in one of her own which she called “The Worming of a Mad Dog.”

As the insults flew back and forth, King James decided women needed to be rebuked by the Church, so under his orders the Bishop of London called in the clergy and gave them the King’s express command to preach vehemently against “the insolency of our women” and their interest in fashionable clothing, and to warn them that if that didn’t do the trick, the King would use other methods of putting them in their place. The King thus gave emphatic notice that he would use every chance of trampling women into permanent invisibility. He denounced them as untrustworthy, conspiratorial creatures who at every opportunity would try to establish their own devotional religious groups, something which — as a matter of fact — they were already doing.

Since they had no official standing, women who delivered sermons to small gatherings had only one way of calling attention to their ideas: they presented themselves as prophets who had heard God’s voice and were able to interpret God’s will. Anne Hutchinson, chafing under a system that allowed three of her brothers to get degrees from Oxford but denied that privilege to her, was understandably drawn to all such women of bold and independent spirit. King James, on the other hand, wanted no women meddling with religion. They were not to preach, he said, and midwives must never be allowed to baptize the newborn even when no Anglican priest was available, not even when the baby was on the verge of death. In his passion to keep women out of religion and

politics and in a submissive role even at home, he encouraged his son and heir, in a widely-circulated, to “teach your wife that it is your office to command, hers to obey.” In an ominous sign of what lay ahead, a witch tract published five years after James took the throne gave new prominence to an old saying: “The more women, the more witches.”

In such an environment, quick-witted Anne Hutchinson was drawn to a rather mystical sect known as “Familists” because they wanted to create what they called “A Family of Love” in which Christian faith would express itself through tender and sympathetic service to others. Originating in Holland, the Familists believed in direct communication with God, without the need for priests, and rejected the doctrine of predestination because they felt it robs us of free will. They believed local churches should have the right to choose their own ministers instead taking whatever a bishop sent, and they argued that all social institutions should depend on popular consent and be open to informed criticism. As you might guess, their critics accused the Family of Love of promoting promiscuous “free love” — which seems never to have been the case — and of preaching anarchy because of their emphasis on individual freedom.

All those ideas, radical at the time, were part of Anne Hutchinson’s intellectual baggage when she arrived at Boston Harbor in the spring of 1634 with her well-to-do husband and their 11 surviving children, two others having died before they left England. Anne’s reputation as a religious maverick was quickly circulated by a Rev. Symmes who had crossed the Atlantic on the same ship with the Hutchinson family. He grumbled

that “Mrs. Hutchinson, in a calculated way, interrupted my shipboard sermons and plied me with cunning questions. She treated me like a nobody with no knowledge of the precious doctrine.” Some in Boston doubted that the family of such a contentious woman should be allowed to join the church, but the Rev. John Cotton spoke up to say the Hutchinsons had been part of his congregation back in England and he knew them to be a devout family. The Hutchinsons were admitted when Governor John Winthrop sided with Cotton, a decision he probably regretted later.

Anne quickly realized she could not hope for Christian love and liberty in the sour preaching of John Wilson, the rigid pastor of the Boston church, so she began inviting people to her home. Women she had helped in childbirth or had healed with her nursing skills, and who adored her, came eagerly to sit on hard benches while Anne analyzed some recent sermon and responded to their questions about God and the Bible and their place in worship. Bay Colony leader John Winthrop’s diary had noted his first impression of Anne as “a woman of ready wit and bold spirit,” so he watched closely from next door as more and more people crowded into the Hutchinson house. He counted as many as 80, an extraordinary number in that tiny community, and he was especially concerned to see that the meetings included more and more men, with the popular Rev. John Cotton sitting on Anne’s right hand and young Governor Henry Vane on her left.

Anne claimed, for herself and some of her disciples, an indwelling of the Holy Spirit that gave them the right to interpret the Bible for themselves. She angered many of the colonists by refusing to support a war

against some nearby Indian tribes, so it was no great surprise when — after her death — many of her followers became pacifist Quakers. She felt no reluctance about claiming to have visions at times in the manner of biblical writers, she said openly that much of the Bible made no sense if it had to be read literally, and she encouraged both men and women to insist on freedom of opinion in their religious life. The all-powerful male hierarchy of Massachusetts called it seduction, their wives called it salvation, and the merchants of Boston considered it good for business. In a colony now divided by such issues, Anne was supported by some powerful men like Gov. Vane and her beloved scholar-minister John Cotton, along with the great majority of the Boston church, but opposed by Deputy Governor John Winthrop, her implacable enemy The Reverend John Wilson of the Boston church, and all the country magistrates and churches.

The strength of these factions was tested in the Spring election of 1637, and Anne's fate was sealed, when John Winthrop won back the governorship from young Henry Vane, who returned to England in disgust at the way things were going. By November, 350 years ago last month, Anne was brought to trial before the general court, chiefly on the charge of that she had "traduced the ministers" — in other words, that she had mocked and slandered them. She was sentenced to banishment from the colony. When the church tried her next on charges of heresy, the man who hated her most, The Reverend John Wilson, finally got his chance. He sentenced her vindictively: "In the name of the church I do not only pronounce you worthy to be cast out, but I

do cast you out and...deliver you up to Satan that you may learn no more to blaspheme, to seduce and to lie.

Therefore, I command you in the name of this church as a leper to withdraw yourself out of the congregation....”

Gov. Winthrop, determined as he was to preserve the new and fragile theocracy, was nevertheless kind enough to let Anne wait until the harsh winter was over before leaving. Early the next Spring she traveled with her children for six days — by canoe over rivers, on foot over Indian paths still deep in snow, spending nights in wigwam shelters or in simple huts dug into the ground for warmth, until on the 7th day she was reunited with her husband who had gone on before to Rhode Island. Determined as ever, she and a few disciples established a settlement on an island off Rhode Island where she kept on preaching her convictions. When a mild earthquake occurred once while she and her followers were at prayer, her enemies back in Boston said it was a sign of God’s disapproval. And when she had a miscarriage in her 15th pregnancy, the same enemies spread rumors that she had brought forth multiple monstrous births, none of them in human shape — yet another proof that God had approved her banishment.

When her beloved husband, who had always supported her, died four years later, she set out with the six children still at home for a Dutch settlement on Long Island Sound, settling near what is now New Rochelle, New York, but was then a wilderness. On an August day, about a year later, an Indian war party massacred Anne and all her family except for 10-year-old Susanna who was kidnapped. Back in Boston, it was final proof of divine providence against a woman too bold, bright and stubborn for her own good. One of her most

conspicuous disciples, Mary Dyer, was hanged in Boston within a few years. After this particular form of insanity exhausted itself a generation later in the Salem witch trials it was clear to thoughtful people in the new world that church and state need to be separate entities.

And by the way, as one more proof that yesterday's heretic often becomes today's hero, statues of Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer adorn the front lawn of the Massachusetts State House — enduring symbols of the freedom of speech and conscience we claim to cherish in America.

We are grateful, Eternal God, that when religion becomes a tyrant
there is always someone bold enough to say so, and to risk life
itself for freedom's sake. Amen