

Freedom of Religion

American History

“A Woman Not Fit for Our Society”

The Anne Hutchinson Story

Born in England, in 1591, Anne Marbury was the second eldest of 13 children. Her father and the Bible dominated Anne's upbringing. Her father, an Anglican Church minister, was so critical of the church that he lost his ministry for a time and was even imprisoned for his religious views. (The Anglican Church, the official church of England, was intolerant of ideas other than its own.) Shortly after her father died, Anne married William Hutchinson. He became a successful businessman and devoted husband who never questioned his wife's role as the religious leader of the family.

Anne began to listen to the teachings of the Puritan

to be the true believers who wanted to reform or purify the Anglican Church. The Anglican Church leaders, backed by the English government, did their best to silence the Puritans by putting them in prison or driving them out of the country. A group of Puritans, led by John Winthrop, left England in 1630 to begin the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Anne was especially drawn to the preaching of John Cotton, a thoughtful Anglican minister with Puritan ideas. Cotton raised one question that particularly bothered Anne: How did people know when they were saved and would be accepted by God into heaven? Cotton preached the Puritan view that although leading a moral life was an important sign of salvation, God alone would make the final choice. Cotton criticized the Anglican teaching that put greater emphasis on following the moral laws of the church than preparing for the spirit of God to enter one's soul. Cotton preached that both were equally important in achieving salvation. In 1633, Anglican officials tried to have Cotton arrested for these and other unapproved ideas. Instead, he fled the country to join fellow Puritans in America.

Anne Hutchinson was depressed by the sudden departure of John Cotton. She had embraced his ideas and looked upon him as her spiritual teacher and persuaded her husband that they should follow Cotton to America.

The “Opinionists”

When the Hutchinsons arrived at Boston, the main settlement in Massachusetts Bay,



▲ Anne Hutchinson at her trial. (The Beumann Archive)

they found a tightly knit community of about one thousand persons. Soon after they landed, both were admitted to the Boston Puritan Church; although Anne was sharply questioned about her beliefs before she was accepted.

Anne filled her time attending to her household and nursing neighbor women who were ill or recovering from childbirth. In the New World, Anne discovered that many women held on to the old Anglican idea that leading a moral life was God's sure sign that a person would get into heaven. Anne disagreed. Under the influence of John Cotton (now one of the ministers of the Boston Puritan Church), Anne concluded that the *only* true sign of being saved was the presence of God's spirit within one.

Because of her busy life, Anne often missed prayer meetings during the week. Criticized for this, she decided to hold prayer meetings in her own home. At first, these were small women's meetings made up of Anne's relatives and nearby neighbors. But, as more women attended the sessions, their husbands became interested. Anne began holding a second prayer meeting for men.

Anne Hutchinson's religious ideas spread throughout the colony. By the summer of 1636, a majority of the members of the Boston Puritan Church supported her views. She became even bolder, claiming that the Puritan ministers (except for John Cotton) lacked the spirit of God. She charged that they deceived the people by preaching the false belief that obeying the moral laws

of the church was enough to be assured of salvation.

Although Anne never formed any organization or even spoke at meetings outside her own home, she became the center of a campaign to win over the souls of the Puritan people. By the summer of 1636, a majority of the members of the Boston Puritan Church supported her views. One of her converts, Henry Vane, defeated John Winthrop in the annual election for governor. The “opinionists,” as the Puritan ministers called Anne's followers, had become a formidable force.

The Puritan Reaction

Despite their single-mindedness, the Puritans did not require everyone to believe exactly as they did. Some people in Massachusetts Bay never became church members. People could disagree with the Puritan Church, but they had to keep quiet about it. Any public questioning about the correctness of the Puritan teachings would trigger not only the wrath of the ministers, but also the force of the government.

Anne Hutchinson pushed Puritan tolerance to its limits. Her belief, that the only true sign of being saved was when God's spirit flooded into a person's heart, troubled the Puritan leaders. If true, they reasoned, people only had to wait for God in His infinite wisdom to act. They did not need moral laws and a church or ministers. Chaos could result under such conditions. To the Puritan ministers and political leaders like John Winthrop, the very existence of

stake. They decided to act.

In December, Anne found herself summoned to the home of John Cotton to confront a group of ministers. They accused her of slander because she had claimed that they were unable to preach the true word of God. Silent at first, Anne gained courage when she recalled a passage from the Bible: "The fear of Man bringeth a snare, but whoso putteth his trust in the Lord shall be safe." Armed by her beliefs, she answered their questions and denied she had slandered them.

The Trials of Anne Hutchinson

John Winthrop, founding leader of Massachusetts Bay and newly re-elected governor after Henry Vane, knew that Anne Hutchinson had to be stopped. She was summoned to appear before the General Court for trial.

On November 7, 1637, at the beginning of her trial, Governor Winthrop said to her, "You are known to be a woman that hath had a great share in promoting and divulging of these opinions that are causes of this trouble."

Acting as both her prosecutor and as one of her judges, Gov. Winthrop began the questioning. We can see from the transcript of her trial that Anne refused to be intimidated.

Mrs. H. What law have I broken?

Gov. Why the fifth commandment.

Mrs. H. I deny that.

Gov. We do not mean to discourse with those of your sex but only this: you do adhere unto them and do endeavor to set forward this faction and so you do dishonor us.

Mrs. H. I do acknowledge no such thing neither do I think that I ever put any dishonor upon you.

Gov. Winthrop accused her of seducing honest persons with false opinions during her prayer meetings. The main charges centered on what she had said at the meeting with the ministers at John Cotton's house nearly a year earlier. The ministers came forward to testify that she had told them that they were not, except for John Cotton, able ministers of the Bible.

On the second day of her trial, Anne demanded that the ministers take an oath, and she eventually got her way. She also called two witnesses of her own, including her long-time idol, John Cotton. To the dismay of Gov. Winthrop, Cotton testified that he could not recall Anne criticizing the other ministers when they had questioned her.

The trial seemed to be going in Anne's favor. Much of the "evidence" was based on rumor. Now, even the direct testimony of

chose to speak out. During her testimony, she claimed that her opinions had come directly from God and He had revealed to her what to believe.

Anne's admission sent shockwaves through the court. To the Puritans, only the prophets and saints of times long past could make such a claim. Gov. Winthrop declared, "This is the thing that hath been the root of all the mischief." Deputy Gov. Thomas Dudley exclaimed, "I am fully persuaded that Mrs. Hutchinson is deluded by the devil." Nearly everyone present voiced agreement.

It was all over. Anne's unexpected admission itself was taken as proof that she was guilty of slandering the ministers and dishonoring the government. Gov. Winthrop pronounced her sentence: "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."

With Anne sentenced, Gov. Winthrop and the General Court moved quickly against Anne Hutchinson's followers. About 80 persons were punished: some were disarmed, lost the right to vote and had to pay a fine, and 20 hardcore followers suffered banishment. Faced with these consequences, anyone who still sympathized with Anne did so silently. John Cotton, believing he had been manipulated by Anne and others to promote their own ideas, joined Gov. Winthrop in his effort to stamp out the Hutchinson movement.

In March 1638, Anne Hutchinson was brought before the Boston Puritan Church and accused of heresy, the holding of false beliefs. During the first day, she withstood nine hours of questioning. Depressed, ill and alone (her husband in Rhode Island, making arrangements for a new home and John Cotton had renounced her), Anne bravely defended herself. In the end, she confessed that she still had not changed her religious beliefs. For this, she was excommunicated.

John Wilson, one of the ministers of the Boston Church, proclaimed, "I do cast you out and... deliver you up to Satan... I command you in the name of Christ Jesus and of this Church as a leper to withdraw yourself out of the congregation." Anne arose and, with her head held high, walked out of the church. On leaving, she said, "Better to be cast out of the Church than to deny Christ."

Excommunicated by the Puritan Church and banished by the government, Anne and her family left Boston on March 28, 1638. She lived on Rhode Island until her husband died four years later. Then, she moved with most of her family still intact to a settlement on Long Island Sound, north of the

present-day New York City. There, in the autumn of 1643, Indians killed her and... but one member of her family. When word reached Boston, the Puritan ministers concluded, with a sense of satisfaction, that God's will had been done. What John Cotton thought was not recorded.

For Discussion and Writing

1. Why was Anne Hutchinson tried by the General Court of Massachusetts Bay? Why was she tried by the Boston Puritan Church? Try to explain the difference between these trials.
2. What should the role of government be in supporting religion?
3. What does "intolerance" mean? Was Puritan Massachusetts Bay Colony an intolerant society? Was Anne Hutchinson an intolerant person? Can you identify examples of religious intolerance today in the United States and the world? Explain your answers.
4. What would you say was Anne Hutchinson's most important contribution to American history?
5. How is our system of government today different from that of Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1600s? Why?

For Further Reading

- Battis, Emery. *Saints and Sectaries*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1962.
- Hall, David D., ed. *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1968. [Includes General Court and church trial transcripts.]

A C T I V I T Y

Freedom of Religion in America

Read the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Amendment 1 [1791]

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or of the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

If this Amendment had existed in 1637 in Massachusetts Bay, would a trial like the one experienced by Anne Hutchinson have been likely? Explain why or why not.

Form small groups. Each group should then be assigned to discuss one of the questions listed below. Group members should try to reach agreement based on their understanding of the First Amendment.