

**The Antinomian Controversy and the Puritan Vision:  
A Historical Perspective on Christian Leadership**

by Jeffrey M. Kahl\*

**Introduction**

The American Puritans are perhaps the most interesting, the most complex, and even the most misunderstood players in the fascinating saga called American History. Radical skeptics such as Perry Miller and William McLoughlin, as well as committed Christians such as H. Richard Niebuhr and J. I. Packer, have credited the Puritans with establishing the foundations of America's intellectual and cultural life. Undoubtedly this is the reason why the Puritans have merited the scholarly attention (on a much grander scale than other American colonial groups) not only of theologians and historians, but sociologists, psychologists, economists, literary critics, rhetoricians, artists, and others. It has been nearly four hundred years since they set foot on American soil, and information surrounding these colonists continues to attract the curiosity of scholars and laypersons alike.

The Antinomian controversy of 1637 has elicited special attention as a crucial event in early American history, and researchers bringing different presuppositions and perspectives to the task have yielded different interpretations of the actual events surrounding the controversy.

Writers such as Anne F. Withington, Jack Schwartz, and Richard B. Morris have concluded that the proceedings against Anne Hutchinson could rightly be characterized as a "show trial" and that the Puritan elders were more interested in their own cause than in the cause of justice.<sup>1</sup>

More theologically-minded scholars such as David Hall, William K. B. Stoeber and Jesper Rosenmeier have attempted to discern an intensive debate over theological minutia (such as the precise relationship between nature and grace) as being the motivating force behind the controversy.<sup>2</sup>

Writers with strong feminist sympathies have emphasized the role that Hutchinson's sex played in the course and eventual outcome of the controversy, while others have attempted to analyze how the Puritans dealt with social deviants in general.<sup>3</sup>

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Emery Battis has even attempted to interpret the controversy by dissecting the psychological profile of Anne Hutchinson, discerning in her admiration of John Cotton a deep yearning for fatherly affection, and explaining her behavior at her trial as the result of "menopausal symptoms."<sup>4</sup>

I certainly see some validity in all of these approaches and perspectives (although in my mind, the last one raises more questions than it answers!). Within the confines of this study, however, I choose to modify and assert the perspective of the great historian Edmund S. Morgan, who viewed the controversy through the eyes of the Puritan leadership. In essence, my thesis is that the Puritan elders of New England *primarily* proceeded against Hutchinson not for theological reasons but for the very practical purpose of maintaining the implementation of their vision. In this sense I do not vilify the Puritan leadership as others might. For while they might not be viewed as "fair" or "tolerant" by modern standards, I do believe that their actions were justifiable (or at least excusable) given the nature of their task and the realities of the situation.<sup>5</sup>

In the pages that follow, I intend to provide a synopsis of the major historical events in the controversy itself, and then to analyze specific historical evidence that supports my thesis. I will also provide reflections on the continuing relevance of such a perspective, specifically regarding leadership in the Christian church today.

## **I. Overview of the Antinomian Controversy**

### **A. The Major Events**

The Puritan movement developed in England as a reactionary movement against the political and religious policies of Queen Elizabeth I, her successors, and the English Parliament. Its adherents did not question the unity of church and state, but they did reject the governmental policies that allowed for continued "Catholic elements" in a state church that should have been more thoroughly "reformed" in doctrine and practice. Leland Ryken's description of Puritanism as a "protest movement" is very appropriate.<sup>6</sup>

In its early stages it was a reaction against the Elizabethan Settlement, but because of Elizabeth's policy of broad toleration, the Puritans themselves were at least able to work "within the system." However, in 1628 Charles I appointed William Laud as Bishop of London (and later Archbishop of Canterbury). Laud's policies involved the active elimination of any sign of nonconformity in the Church of England. This (coupled with Charles'

dissolution of Parliament in 1629) forced the Puritans to consolidate and act, for it was obvious that the government would not only *not* support them, but it would actively oppose them. It is during this era that the initial Puritan migrations to the New World took place.<sup>7</sup>

Despite their common resolve to reform the government and Church of England, there was a great deal of diversity among the Puritans themselves. Certainly they held some basic theological tenets in common (for example, salvation by grace or the authority of scripture). But there was no unanimity among them as far as their practical piety is concerned. In the wake of Perry Miller's voluminous research on the Puritans, several scholars have noted and documented incredible diversity—even tension—within Puritanism, long before the Antinomian controversy in England erupted.

In her recent book *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts*, historian Janice Knight specifically takes issue with Perry Miller's notion of Puritanism as a monolithic orthodoxy, with deviants such as Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams being few and far between. On the contrary, Knight perceives two distinct theological/spiritual perspectives emanating from the Puritan movement that can be traced back to its earliest beginnings in England. The "Intellectual Fathers" descended intellectually from William Perkins and Williams Ames and included leaders such as Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, Peter Bulkeley, and John Winthrop. The "Spiritual Brethren," on the other hand, had their English roots in the leadership of Richard Sibbes and John Preston, and their American representatives were John Cotton, John Davenport, and Henry Vane.<sup>8</sup>

A more intensive analysis can be found in Jerald C. Brauer's *Types of Puritan Piety*, which notices four distinct expressions of the Puritan consciousness, again going back to its earliest formulations in England. The four types are: 1) "Nomism," emphasizing law and order; 2) "evangelicalism," emphasizing the preaching of the good news; 3) "rationalism," emphasizing God's truth found in nature and reason; and 4) "mysticism," emphasizing the soul's union with God in Christ.<sup>9</sup>

It is unlikely that any of the Puritan writers would fit neatly into one of these categories, to the complete exclusion of the others. (Historical figures never completely conform to our categories, do they?) However, I do hold to the view that individual Puritans certainly did write and think from a perspective that may have made them more sensitive to one type of theology and piety. We must remember that these people were not uneducated peasants who unthinkingly accepted the doctrines of a theological demagogue. Most were well educated Christians who knew how to think for themselves. It would personally surprise me if a movement composed of such people did *not* include

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a healthy level of diversity. Understanding this dynamic of Puritanism may help us to interpret the reality of the Antinomian controversy itself.

This diverse movement was able to maintain a somewhat-united front in England, because its focus was on its opposition to Charles I and Archbishop Laud. (A modern parallel - possibly but only slightly exaggerated - would be the student groups of the 1960's, who spoke with a united voice as long as their attention was on that which they opposed.) The problem in New England was that this opposition movement was then required to institutionalize its own understanding of church and state, with the added inconvenience of doing so on a virgin continent with virtually no civilization in place (by 17<sup>th</sup>-century European standards, at least). This would be, in a phrase later coined by Rev. Samuel Danforth, their "errand into the wilderness."<sup>10</sup>

Their expectations of the New World differed, as did their reactions to the realities that they encountered there.<sup>11</sup> (These realities will be discussed briefly in the next section of the paper). For the sake of this inquiry, however, let it be said that following the initial euphoria of their arrival in Massachusetts Bay, the colonists were generally fueled by a desire to re-create the world that they had just left. The world that they entered was harsh and unpredictable, and this drove them to establish a stable social structure, forge strong social ties, and to preserve the cultural dynamics that existed in East Anglia.<sup>12</sup> Their covenant theology, which prescribed not only a relationship between man and God but also between man and his community, was another incentive for "thinking organizationally," as it were...for determining the good of the whole group and not merely the good of individuals.<sup>13</sup>

The initial migration of Puritans to the Bay Colony took place in 1629-1630, with John Winthrop as one of the leading organizers. Edmund S. Morgan notes that even as arrangements were being made to secure passengers for the voyage, Winthrop found it necessary to think "politically." It was Winthrop's privilege to reject those non-Puritans who wished to join the expedition for purely economic reasons. However, he realized the necessity to have skilled persons of every sort (such as coopers, sawyers, and surgeons) in order for their community to survive in an unsettled area. If such skilled persons could not be found among the "godly," it was his duty to enlist them wherever they could be found. Thus it seems that even in England Winthrop was too practical a man to entertain the possibility of having a totally uniform orthodoxy in his "city on a hill." His desire was to build a commonwealth.<sup>14</sup>

An interesting point must be made here. Winthrop and his initial party of immigrants arrived in Massachusetts Bay in 1630. They had weathered a

rough transatlantic crossing. They worked to build some initial semblance of shelter and stability on the savage soil of New England. They experienced the rejection of their English suppliers when the Bay Company's initial hopes were quenched by the American reality. They experienced the "piercing cold" of the first winters, made the first contacts with the Indians, and expanded their territory into the frontier. In short, they started *de novo* in an attempt to produce a "civilized society." They did this for *three years* before any of the major Antinomian instigators - John Cotton, Anne Hutchinson, and John Wheelwright - ever set foot on the American continent. By the time these instigators arrived, the initial building blocks of society were already in place, and tight-knit communities had already been forged.<sup>15</sup>

The "Antinomian leaders" arrived in Massachusetts Bay Colony as it was experiencing a religious revival. During this religious awakening people very naturally felt assured of their salvation. By 1634, however, the revival had waned and the inhabitants once again began to struggle with personal doubts regarding the status of their souls. In the waning of the revival, two distinct positions regarding assurance came from the ranks of the Puritan clergy, and it is the conflict of these two positions which basically led to the Antinomian controversy.

### **B. The Opposing Viewpoints**

The position of the Puritan leadership basically asserted that in the absence of an immediate sense of God's presence, right actions are the surest sign that one has received justification from God and therefore assurance that one is saved. In their mind, a conscious effort to obey the Law of God will be a sure sign that the person's will has truly been transformed by the Holy Spirit. Two theological expositions of this view can be found in the writings of Peter Bulkeley and Thomas Shepard. Bulkeley's position is more philosophical, utilizing Aristotle's four classes of causes as means for arguing for the necessity of active response on the part of a believer. Shepard's perspective is more "existential," arguing that justified persons are those who take God's grace *seriously* and therefore are willing to "work out their salvation with fear and trembling."<sup>16</sup> In both cases, their underlying piety of obedience is consistent with that of the "Intellectual Fathers" which Janice Knight discerned in her research.

This view was opposed by the Antinomians, whose theological representatives were John Cotton and John Wheelwright. More akin to Janice Knight's "Spiritual Brethren," the Antinomians were much more mystical and evangelical in their piety and teaching. For both Cotton and Wheelwright, works of the law are absolutely no proof of one's justification. Using Philippians 3:12 as his text, Cotton argues that when an individual receives

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God's justification, it is an utterly passive reception. God is the only active agent and He acts directly on the soul, not through any intermediary. One must focus on Christ, not on good works, in order to be assured of their salvation. Thus good works are no proof that a person has been justified. In fact, John Wheelwright even went so far as to assert that the preaching of the Puritan leadership reeked of papist idolatry.<sup>17</sup>

Scholars such as Patricia Roberts-Miller have analyzed these differing viewpoints and have averred that it was the Antinomians themselves who remained true to the true Calvinist reformed faith by insisting on the primacy of grace in justification. It was the Puritan elders themselves who deviated from Reformed doctrine, according to Roberts-Miller, by teaching that natural human faculties can prepare one to receive the grace of God, and that external merits can offer proof of one's internal justification.<sup>18</sup>

William Stoeber, on the other hand, has argued in his doctoral dissertation and in other publications that the controversy actually comes down to a deep theological discussion rooted in the relationship between nature and grace. He asserts that the Puritan elders actually held to a more traditional theological position by acknowledging the reality that God has ordained to work *through* nature to achieve His supernatural ends. Thus "works" – either of preparation or of evidence – are not necessarily "natural" in the sense that they are prideful human attempts to achieve salvation. Rather, they are the means by which God chooses to operate in assuring the salvation of the individual. (This relationship of nature and grace would lead the Puritan elders to naturally have a higher concept of the community and of the state, as the necessary natural means by which God chooses to regulate human affairs.)<sup>19</sup>

Likewise, Stoeber has presented the Antinomians as the proponents of a near-Barthian understanding of reality: that God in His sovereign majesty acts directly on the human soul, that nature has no part in the process...in short, that "grace which is subject to empirical observation, as something belonging to the created order, is qualitatively different from grace which is dispensed immediately by the Holy Spirit in his own person." In other words, at the deepest theological levels, the Antinomians minimized God's use of the created order in the process of salvation. (Carrying this position to its political conclusions, it seems that the state would not be seen as having any inherently divine purpose. It is easy to see why the Puritan elders might find this theology offensive.)<sup>20</sup>

I accept Stoeber's conclusions, to the extent that I do believe that the two opposing views in the Antinomian crisis can be viewed as two entirely

different understandings of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural realms and thus, basically two different metaphysical systems. I also accept that, carried to their logical conclusions, they provide radically opposing understandings of the role of the state in human affairs, specifically of the state in its relationship to spiritual issues. It is not Stoever's *theological* analysis with which I am in conflict. My conflict is with his historical analysis that theology was the motivating factor in the actions taken by the Puritan leadership in that controversy.

I believe that Anne Hutchinson and John Wheelwright were denounced and exiled from the Massachusetts Bay Colony for primarily political reasons. Certainly their theology was offensive to the Puritan elders, and certainly *their* motivation for denouncing the elders was theological. It is also clear that the debates within the controversy were theological in nature, for theology (consciously or unconsciously) provided the basis for their entire sense of life. What I will attempt to prove in the next section, however, is that the nature of their own vision—combined with the nature of the American reality—forced them to think more pragmatically about basic issues of survival and human relations. I conclude from this that their ultimate actions against Hutchinson and other Antinomians were the result of a very practical need to preserve their community, its vision, and the stability that it provided in the New World.

## II. Historical Evidence for the Thesis

The purpose of the last section was to detail some of the important historical events leading up to the Antinomian Controversy, and to briefly present the personalities and viewpoints of the two opposing sides. In this section, three further pieces of evidence, found in the history of the Bay Colony, will be used to substantiate the thesis that the Antinomian Controversy was primarily driven by the practical concerns of organizational leadership and not by intensive theological debates.

### A. The Puritan Vision

One piece of evidence is the initial vision, or purpose, with which the Massachusetts Bay Colony was settled. As non-separating Congregationalists, their mission to America was not to break ties with the Church of England or with their homeland. Rather, their purpose was to *implement in reality* their notion of a proper social and ecclesiastical structure, based on the explicit teachings of Scripture. Their hope was that their brethren in England would see the success of their undertaking, realize it to be the true expression of God's laws for society, and then reform all of England according to their model. Winthrop

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himself, in his famous sermon *A Model of Christian Charity*, makes it clear that this project was not undertaken simply for its own sake, but because "the eyes of the world" would be watching to see their progress.<sup>21</sup> Individual Puritans may have had other reasons for migrating to the New World - concern for their own spiritual well-being, or for the lost souls of the American Natives, were two major reasons - but as far as the Puritan leadership was concerned, the dominant reason for the migration was the building of a Bible Commonwealth that would be seen and emulated by the rest of the Protestant world.<sup>22</sup>

As noted earlier, however, Winthrop had no illusions about the realities of such a quest. Humans are by nature totally depraved, and to expect that there would be no disorder in this "City on a Hill" would be an incredibly naïve expectation. But they also had no illusions about the realities that they would face in the New World, and this led Winthrop to insist that "wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities, wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekenes, gentlenes, patience, and liberallity."<sup>23</sup>

The Puritan vision was a corporate vision, from the ecclesiastical and the political perspective. (Indeed, these perspectives were not separate within "the New England Mind," but were intimately fused into one understanding of human relations.) Puritan leadership was realistic enough to accept that human sinfulness would exist even within their godly commonwealth. They were also tolerant of diversity in theological issues (This will be seen later in how the Puritan leadership dealt with John Cotton as opposed to other Antinomians). However, they could not tolerate radical individualists that disrupted the order of the community and thus curbed the implementation of their vision.

## **B. The American Reality**

A second, more telling piece of evidence is their actual encounter with the American reality. When one thinks of the contrast between seventeenth century Britain and seventeenth century America, one can only imagine the reactions of the Puritans when their boats landed at Massachusetts Bay. Peter N. Carroll notes that before the migrations, most Puritans had a very optimistic appraisal of what the New World had to offer...it was "good land." Their mental pictures may have been different, but they were all optimistic. By the time they actually arrived, however, their appraisals of the New World differed greatly: some described it favorably, almost viewing it as the Promised Land; some felt immediate displeasure and reported that it did not meet with their expectations.



Winthrop himself was optimistic, but his optimism was “tempered by a greater realism” – they would have to work and cultivate if they expected to truly benefit from the New World.<sup>24</sup>

Carroll specifically makes this assertion regarding the Puritans’ initial response to the wilderness: “Their background provided scant preparation for the difficulties of settling the untamed continent, and only a painful process of trial and error enabled the Puritans to adjust to life in the wilderness.” In transporting their “ideal” to a virgin continent, they would have to conform to the realities they encountered, even as they tried to bring those realities into conformity with their ideal.<sup>25</sup>

As early as 1631, the Puritans recognized the need to fortify themselves into united communities, for the purposes of protection from Indian raids, even though their initial relations with the Natives were friendly. In 1634, an Indian attack on two white sea-captains, plus their crew, started the chain reaction that would ultimately lead to the Pequot War in 1636-1638 (roughly the same time period as the Antinomian crisis). By 1636 the colony had already created a professional military establishment to deal with external attacks. Up until then attacks were almost nonexistent because the majority of the Native Tribes dealt peacefully with the Puritans, and the Puritans reciprocated their goodwill. The Pequots were different, however. They were a militant group that was determined to regain control of all northern Massachusetts.<sup>26</sup>

By 1638, the need for systematic defense and colonial unity was even more evident. Problems back in England left many to think that New England would be left without adequate aid from their mother country, and several Indian tribes began to show more hostility towards one another that might result in engagements on Puritan territory. Such problems understandably caused fear in the hearts of the colonists, and by 1643 the fears of Indian attacks became so paramount that an inter-colonial confederation was formed in order to provide for a “common defense.” The Puritans’ anxieties even prompted them to ask the heretic Roger Williams, who was ousted from Massachusetts Bay prior to Hutchinson, to join the confederation. This would seem to be a strong point in favor of the view that the Puritans were willing to cooperate with theological opponents when practical logic called for such measures.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, Peter Carroll notes that the year 1637 was a year of bad harvests for the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and at a time when Great Britain was holding back its supplies, such a bad harvest was probably a devastating thing in itself. Puritan historian Edward Johnson would later write of that year, “The Lord surrounded his chosen Israel with dangers deepe to make his miraculous deliverance famous...throughout the world.”<sup>28</sup>

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It is clear that even without the Antinomian controversy, the years 1636-1638 would have tested the stability of the Puritans' City on a Hill, and they would have been forced to take desperate measures to preserve their own safety and the safety of their loved ones. Inserting the Antinomian controversy into this turbulent American reality makes it all the more understandable why the Puritan elders tried their hardest to quell the inner tension which was promulgated by the words and actions of Anne Hutchinson and her cohorts. It is especially understandable why they took offense, not just at her vocal proclamation of her theological disagreement, but at her vocal challenge of their leadership.

### C. The Outcome of the Controversy

One more aspect of the controversy need to be briefly brought out, which may even further prove that the Puritans were indeed motivated by the practical rather than the theological.

This aspect is the actual outcome of the controversy, following the trial of Anne Hutchinson. Hutchinson, the chief instigator and the most vocal proponent of the Antinomian creed, was ousted from the Massachusetts Bay Colony and viewed as satanic. John Cotton, who provided the theological rationale for the Antinomian creed (at least in America) was never ousted, and indeed, continued to be revered by the colony's leadership. Why?

Perhaps Cotton was not officially condemned because he actually had a hand in formulating the laws that governed the Bay Colony.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps his high status as a Puritan preacher exempted him from such harsh treatment. Or perhaps because he confined himself to theological issues, remained conspicuously neutral during the proceedings against Hutchinson, and ended up announcing the error of his ways, he was forgiven.<sup>30</sup>

Hutchinson, on the other hand, was not neutral, and she did not confine herself to mere theological discussions. She vocally and actively condemned any minister who did not espouse her views. She felt that their teachings *and their authority* ought to be rejected. The only two ministers that escaped her vociferous wrath were John Cotton and John Wheelwright. Thus, she made the Antinomian controversy into much more than a mere theological debate. For her, it was a challenge to what she viewed as apostate leadership.<sup>31</sup>

The fact that she was a woman also had a part to play. However, we must point out that the Puritans were not dark medieval misogynists—the writings of many Puritan men reflect a deep love for their women. Again, ultimately the Puritans were thinking “organizationally.” The cultural network

that they had established required that families be orderly and intact so that the society as a whole would be stable and orderly. (Even bachelors could not escape their cultural statutes, being required to live with another family.) The over-zealousness of Hutchinson was not necessarily a challenge to the masculinity of the Puritan elders. But as a woman, individually condemning Puritan leadership and modeling that for others, it is easy to see why she was viewed as a tremendous challenge to the stability and order of the society.<sup>32</sup>

The “straw that broke the camel’s back,” so to speak, was Hutchinson’s claim to be the recipient of immediate revelations from the Holy Spirit. This she did in the presence of her “judges,” and it precipitated a lengthy discussion on the nature of revelation itself. From the practical perspective, however, her claim basically intensified her self-perception (and her judges’ perception of her) as an individualist who would set her own ideas above those of the community, and refuse to be held accountable.<sup>33</sup>

From a theological perspective, there was very little difference between Anne Hutchinson and John Cotton. Both would be considered “Spiritual Brethren,” using the categories supplied earlier in this paper by historian Janice Knight. It was their actions against the community’s leadership that was the decisive factor in determining their respective fates. Of the two, Cotton was the more “pragmatic,” possessing more political savvy. He never directly opposed the community’s leadership, and he never officially endorsed the woman who was at the heart of the controversy.

Hutchinson, on the other hand, openly asserted her attacks against the Puritan leadership, without regard for their position. She also apparently had little regard for the fact that these same leaders were in the midst of confronting bitter external conflict as well. She was attacking them, all the while living under the protection that their leadership afforded her.

Certainly a strong-willed woman, a woman of ideas and of ideals, it is my perspective that it was not her ideas that ultimately led to her rejection and expulsion. Rather, it was her strong-will, and the actions that resulted. Given the nature of these actions, Anne Hutchinson was too much of a threat to the stability and order of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Given the realities with which the Puritan leaders were dealing, her actions ultimately could not be reconciled with the vision that they were trying to implement.

### **III. Continuing Influences**

In assessing the relevance of the Antinomian controversy for the present time, I must first make a brief commentary regarding two aspects of American life that show the continuing influence of the Puritans.

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### A. American Pragmatism

First, a word must be said about the way in which the Puritans have indeed contributed to our "cultural core," as so many historians have credited them.

It seems to me that Americans have traditionally been viewed as a nation of fierce pragmatists, whose aim in life is to make a practical difference in the world, not to delve into the mysteries of existence and ferret out eternal, philosophical truths. Our goals have always been based on the "real world," and our heroes have always been those who make successes of themselves in this life: businessmen, politicians, athletes, and entertainers. We are not prone to esteem highly those whose ambition is more directed towards theoretical or eternal pursuits. Indeed, I concur with those philosophers who will tell you that America's one unique contribution to the "life of the mind" has been the philosophy of Pragmatism, championed by William James and John Dewey at the turn of the last century. The name of the philosophy says it all: pragmatism, a practical philosophy. Any theoretical ideas that Americans *have* used have generally been imported from Europe, and from what I can discern, there have been no *original* American theologians. (One could argue that Jonathan Edwards is an exception, but I think that is a gross exaggeration. His theological system is basically an attempt at fusing the concepts of two European thinkers: Calvin and Locke. Whitefield and Finney were both much more interested in the practical aspects of revival, and twentieth century American theologians like the Niebuhr brothers were basically disciples of Barth.)

This cultural phenomenon, I believe, can be traced back to the original Puritan elders, whose theoretical ideas were shaped by European thinkers, and who were themselves practical men with a very practical purpose of building a godly community. While many "free-thinking" Americans wish to see themselves as the heirs of Williams and Hutchinson, I believe we must concede that the Puritan elders themselves have influenced the way we do things here in America.

### B. The Dichotomy of American Politics

There is a second aspect of American life in which the influence of Puritanism may be discerned. This is in the dichotomous nature of American politics.

The political discourse of our country continues to be animated by very basic questions, and one of those is the relationship between the individual and

the community. How does one reconcile individual rights with community needs? How far should individual rights go? Even now, in a nation that is now more thoroughly secularized, should a person be free to espouse and proclaim any ideas, no matter how destructive they might be to that nation?

We need only go back fifty years in our nation's history to find a more recent example. At the height of the Cold War, was it justifiable for the American government to blacklist those individuals who held and promulgated radical leftist views, so close to the Communist views that we were trying actively to condemn? Or should their preaching of ideas that were (at their root) so contrary to the American system, be protected by that very system?

These are the kinds of questions that continue to inspire the political debate in our country. Liberals and conservatives, using very diverse methods and ideologies, have attempted to reconcile this seemingly-irreconcilable tension: the tension of the individual and the community. In reconciling this tension, we would do well to learn from our Puritan predecessors. We must be willing to bring opposing viewpoints into an open forum for deliberation, not merely on superficial jargon and rhetoric (which is essentially the extent of current political dialogue), but on fundamental issues. However, we must treat as traitorous any person's *statements or actions* which show an inherent hostility towards our nation's vision, institutions, and leadership.

In a very sad case of historical irony, the current trend in this country seems to be the very reverse. A person in public life is now excused from almost any statement or action – no matter how inherently evil or opposed to American ideals it may be – as long as that individual espouses the radical, ultraliberal worldview and agenda of this nation's "cultural elite."

### **Concluding Reflections**

As I conclude this paper, I look back at my career over the last twelve years. Six of those years were spent in a world of academics, first at Ashland University, and then at Ashland Theological Seminary. As a person with a passionate love of history—both sacred and secular—my major focus was on the theoretical, and my sense of life was shaped by a very unrealistic vision of the world, typical of bookworms. Had I endeavored to study the Antinomian controversy back then, I have no doubt that I would have sided with Anne Hutchinson the victim and proclaimed the "vicious evils" of the Puritan elders.

My last six years have been in full-time Christian leadership roles, and I find that these years have been more of an education than the first six. I am still a lover of history, now not necessarily for its own sake, but as it may potentially inform the present and future. I have learned to deal with the

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practical aspects of leadership, the ups and downs of ministry, and other harsh realities for which not even the greatest seminary or graduate school professor can prepare a person. My sense of life is now tempered by a much more realistic appraisal of people and situations. I think of the numerous conflicts that I have endured in my job: people whose actions, attitudes, and words were radically opposed to the vision that I was trying to implement. As the person in the leadership position, I have often found that the integrity of my vision for ministry would be jeopardized if my opponents were allowed free reign. Thus, I had to accept the hard burden of confronting those individuals, explaining their errors, and in some cases, removing them from their positions.

Perhaps these experiences have created in me an overt bias in favor of the Puritan leadership. I do recognize that their vision of a theocratic government was, in part, flawed. While one may believe that government is an institution ordained by God, one must also concede that, by its nature, government's purpose is secular: the maintenance of order and justice in human affairs. No radical theocracy can long endure the reality that human beings have minds which they will use freely, and they can not be forced to agree in matters of faith and conscience without the conscious (or unconscious) consent of the citizens.

The Puritans can not entirely be blamed for their error, however, as it was commonly held at that point in history. Every Christian denomination (with the possible exception of the Anabaptists, who influenced Williams) in some sense believed that government had a right, even an obligation, to endorse specific religious dogmas and to maintain an established church based on those dogmas.

Given this excusable historical error, I believe the Puritans did the best they could. I think John Winthrop, Thomas Shepard, and John Cotton were all good leaders with the tremendous courage and vision necessary to build a more thoroughly godly society in the untamed wilderness of the New World. Yet while visionary, they were also realistic, practical men who were able to deal with the harshness that confronted them in America. I know many "visionary" Christian leaders, yet I suspect many of them would shy away from such a harsh reality (and to be honest, I probably would as well). The fact that they did not shy away, but actively attempted to make their ideal a working reality, shows their commitment, their courage, and their faith.

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<sup>1</sup> See Richard B. Morris, *Fair Trial: fourteen who stood accused, from Anne Hutchinson to Alger Hiss*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952; Anne F. Withington and

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Jack Schwartz, "The Political Trial of Anne Hutchinson," *The New England Quarterly* LI (1978) 226-240.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*, David D. Hall, editor. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1968, pp. 3-23. William K. B. Stoever, "Nature, Grace, and John Cotton: The Theological Dimensions in the New England Antinomian Controversy," *Church History* XLIV, (1975), pp. 22-33. Jesper Rosenheimer, "New England's Perfection: The Image of Adam and the Image of Christ in the Antinomian Controversy, 1634-1638," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, XXVII (1970), pp. 435-459.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Barker-Benfield, "Anne Hutchinson and the Puritan Attitude Toward Women," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2. (Fall, 1972), pp. 65-92. Lyle Koehler, "The Case of the American Jezebels: Anne Hutchinson and Female Agitation during the years of the Antinomian Turmoil, 1638-1640," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Series, XXXVI (1974), pp. 55-78. Kai Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance*. New York: Wiley, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> Emery Battis, *Saints and Sectaries*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962. This perspective is the weakest, in my opinion. Battis errs in implying that a person's inner psyche is the *only* stimulus for making decisions and taking actions. This undermines the idea that the actual realities of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and the actual political situation therein, could have been motivating factors in the outworking of Hutchinson's case. This is what I am primarily arguing.

<sup>5</sup> I have taken Morgan's perspective primarily from two sources: *The Puritan Dilemma*, New York: Harper Collins, 1958; and "The Case Against Anne Hutchinson," *New England Quarterly* X (1937) 635-649.

<sup>6</sup> Leland Ryken, *Worldly Saints: The Puritans As They Really Were*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986, 7-16.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* John Winthrop saw Laud's appointment and Charles' dissolution of Parliament as signs of the "evill and declininge tymes" that foreshadowed "some heavy scourge and Judgment." See Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma*, 28-29.

<sup>8</sup> Janice Knight, *Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995, 2-3. Knight specifically refers to the "Spiritual Brethren" as an "alternative community," emphasizing that this distinction is more than superficial.

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<sup>9</sup> Jerald C. Brauer, "Types of Puritan Piety," *Church History*, LVI, 1 (1987), pp. 39-58. Representing nomistic piety is Thomas Cartwright and Walter Travers. Evangelicalism: Tyndale, Preston, and Sibbes. Rationalism: John Milton and John Goodwin. Mysticism: Sir Francis Rous.

<sup>10</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*. Cambridge: Belknap, 1956, 1-3.

<sup>11</sup> See especially Peter N. Carroll, *Puritanism and the Wilderness: The Intellectual Significance of the American Frontier, 1629-1700*. NY and London: Columbia University Press, 1969, 8-14, 46-58. See also David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*. NY and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, 16-18, 50-57.

<sup>12</sup> Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 50-57.

<sup>13</sup> Ronald D. Cohen, "Church and State in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts: Another look at the Antinomian Controversy," in *Journal of Church and State* XII, 1991, 478. See also Allen Carden, *Puritan Christianity in America: Religion and Life in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990, 141-146.

<sup>14</sup> Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma*, 49-51.

<sup>15</sup> Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma*, 54-68; Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 50-57; Carroll, *Puritanism and the Wilderness*, 52. See also Alden T. Vaughan, *New England Frontier, Puritans and Indians 1620-1675*. Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown & Co., 1965, 95-103. This may be speculation, but it seems to me that these initial three years are necessary to understanding why the Puritan leaders, especially Winthrop, held such a high view of the community: It was the only source of security in a harsh and unpredictable world. The ease with which Hutchinson defied the community could very well stem from the fact that she did *not* experience those three crucial years.

<sup>16</sup> "Peter Bulkeley and John Cotton: On Union with Christ" in Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy*, 34-36. Thomas Shepard, *God's Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard's Cambridge*, Michael McGiffert, ed. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1972, 3.

<sup>17</sup> "Letters between Thomas Shepard and John Cotton," in *The Antinomian Controversy*, 23-33.



<sup>18</sup> Patricia Roberts-Miller, *Voices in the Wilderness: Public Discourse and the Paradox of Puritan Rhetoric*. Tuscaloosa & London: University of Alabama Press, 1999, 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> William K. Stoeber, "Nature, Grace, and John Cotton: The Theological Dimension in the New England Antinomian Controversy," in *Church History* XLIV (1975), 23-33.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* See especially pages 28-29.

<sup>21</sup> Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity," in *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of their Writings*, Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson, editors. New York: Harper & Row, 1938, 198-199.

<sup>22</sup> Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 18. The concern for their own spiritual well-being stemmed from the perception of England as falling into moral and spiritual degeneracy. Very few Puritans showed and direct concern for the American Natives, although John Eliot and Thomas Shepard are notable exceptions (See Vaughan, *New England Frontier*.).

<sup>23</sup> Winthrop, "A Model of Christian Charity."

<sup>24</sup> Carroll, *Puritanism and the Wilderness*, 8, 46-52. The optimists included Francis Higginson, Thomas Graves, and Thomas Morton, who specifically referred to New England as "a land that flowes with Milke and Hony" (p. 50). The pessimists included Anne Bradstreet, Edward Johnson, and William Wood. So from the beginning, even their views on the reality of the situation were more diverse than we are often led to believe.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52-58. In my opinion, this is where most historians err in their assessment of the Puritans: they assume that the pure Puritan vision was the only factor in their decision-making process, and that actual reality made no difference.

<sup>26</sup> Vaughan, *New England Frontier*, 123-135. Vaughan makes it clear that the Pequot War was not a racial war: the Puritans were trying to protect their community from hostile natives. Their motivation was *not* the suppression of Indians, but the salvation of their own community.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 155-172.

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<sup>28</sup> Carroll, 70-71, 151.

<sup>29</sup> Louis B. Wright, *The Atlantic Frontier: Colonial American Civilization*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1947, 199. Cotton utilized the OT almost exclusively (especially Leviticus) in his formulation of a legal code for Massachusetts Bay. This focus solely on Scripture was too much for the Puritan leaders, so Nathaniel Ward was later looked to for legal guidance. Interestingly, Ward's legal scheme was based on Magna Carta and Edward Coke as well as the OT—and these non-Scriptural authorities would have had more to say about limiting government's authority.

<sup>30</sup> Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans*, 90-91.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid*, 78-79.

<sup>32</sup> Fischer, *Albion's Seed*, 73-75.

<sup>33</sup> Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy*, 336-337.