

The Puritans and Dissent: The Cases of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson

by Francis J. Bremer

Every society constructs what one scholar has called a “perimeter fence,” which sets the boundary between actions and beliefs that are acceptable and those that are not.[1] This is as true of the United States in the twentieth century as it was of New England in the seventeenth century. The debates over where to place that boundary can be very heated, pitting those who believe that a broader range of opinions can foster progress towards the society’s goals against others who fear that contested notions will poison the body politic.



“Landing of Roger Williams,” based on a painting by Alonzo Chappel (New York: Johnson Fry & Col, 1867) (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

The puritans[2] who settled New England in 1630 were not coming to America to promote religious freedom for all, but to achieve for themselves a freedom from the church and civil officials in England who had prevented them from pursuing their faith as they believed God wanted them to. The settlement of Massachusetts presented the colonists with their first opportunity to decide what views and actions were acceptable and to prohibit what was not. Virtually all puritans believed that they had been born again through God’s grace, bestowed upon them despite their unworthiness. Their reaction to this experience differed, however. Massachusetts governor John Winthrop was typical of puritans who never lost awareness of the fact that they were unworthy of God’s love and still imperfect in their understanding. Others believed that because God had blessed them, their views on what was to be believed and practiced were beyond question. These differences were key as the colonists sought to establish the perimeter fence that would define their society.

Open discussion that could lead to a greater understanding of God’s will and way was how the godly had worked to achieve unity when in England. In his famous “Christian Charity” lay sermon, Governor Winthrop expressed the belief that if the colonists lived as God desired them to, he would allow them to “see much more of his wisdom, power, goodness and truth than we have formerly been acquainted with.”[3] Clearly he did not believe that he or his fellow colonists had no further need for debate, and the early history of the colony was characterized by vigorous discussion within individual congregations and in the larger community. In many cases debates over religious views led to agreement or to a willingness to accept differences. For example, the Watertown clergyman George Philips expressed a belief that the Roman Catholic Church was a true church, something most Protestants had traditionally denied. After extended discussion, he abandoned that position. What was essential to the system of open discussion of religious views was the willingness of all sides to admit that they might be wrong and that their openness further truth. This, as well as the nature of the actual ideas proposed, helps to explain the controversies that centered on Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson.

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Roger Williams was a charismatic young clergyman who had first come to New England in 1631. He was

welcomed by Winthrop as “a godly minister.”[4] Just as his fellow puritans had criticized the Church of England as not going far enough to advance the kingdom of God, so Williams would use his prophetic voice to challenge the colonists to go further. All puritans were committed to restricting religious ordinances to those who were God’s elect and limiting religious interaction with those who were not godly. Williams pursued this goal with a zeal that led him to insist on things that most of his peers believed were too extreme. After a brief stay in Boston, he left for the Plymouth colony because the Massachusetts churches refused to renounce all connections with the Church of England. He felt more comfortable with the Plymouth Separatists (Pilgrims), but his drive to push the quest for purity ever further soon worried the colonists there. Elder William Brewster and Governor William Bradford both expressed concern over Williams’s beliefs that it was wrong for a godly magistrate to administer an oath to an ungodly man, that it was wrong for a godly man to even pray with family members who were not elect, and that the practice of infant baptism allowed some who were not chosen by God to enter the church.

Disappointed with the Pilgrims, Williams returned to Massachusetts, settling in Salem, where he preached unofficially and continued to express radical ideas. He asserted that women should wear veils when they went abroad, but especially in church services, as a sign that they had inherited Eve’s corruption. He questioned the appropriateness of the red cross of St. George as a symbol on the English flag. He took the position that it was inappropriate for the king to have granted a charter to Massachusetts since the monarch had no true claim to the land he was dispensing.

The issue of women and veils was debated in the Boston church and evidently resolved against the requirement. The Salem magistrate John Endecott acted on Williams’s views on the use of the cross by cutting the red cross from the English flag used by the local militia, an act that led to his suspension from public office by the Massachusetts authorities who feared how the action might be viewed by the English government. The denial of the king’s right to have granted the charter carried even greater potential to elicit action against the colony. In December 1633 Governor Winthrop persuaded Williams to desist from advancing that argument, and some of the clergy persuaded the colony’s Court of Assistants that the views expressed by Williams need not be punished. Had Williams kept his controversial views to himself, no further action would have been taken against him. But in November 1634, Thomas Dudley, who had replaced Winthrop as governor that year, determined that Williams had continued to speak his mind on these issues, and in particular that he had challenged the legitimacy of the oath of allegiance the colony had recently required of all inhabitants. Dudley was a man who would be memorialized by his loving daughter Anne Bradstreet as being “to sectaries, a whip and maul.”[5]

In April 1635 the General Court under Dudley’s leadership summoned Williams to answer these charges, and ordered the clergyman to desist from promulgating his controversial views. This he refused to do. It is important to realize that no one, not even Roger Williams at this time, was prepared to tolerate the practice or advocacy of errors. Williams, for example, didn’t simply desire that he and others who had objections to oaths be allowed to avoid them. He insisted that the colony authorities were violating God’s wishes in doing so. He was as intolerant of the errors of the majority as his chief critics were of him.

In October 1635 the magistrates ordered that Williams be sent out of the colony. The implementation of the verdict was originally deferred till the following spring, but when Williams continued to meet with others and promulgate the views that had been condemned, orders were sent to seize him and immediately ship him to England. John Winthrop warned Williams, giving his friend the chance to flee to the area around Narragansett Bay, where the land he settled on would become known as Providence, in the colony of Rhode Island. There Williams would continue to search for further truth, briefly becoming a Baptist before abandoning the hopes for a pure church created by men and formulating a position calling

for broad religious toleration.

Even before Williams was banished, the foundations of a more severe controversy were being laid in the Boston church. Puritans encouraged the laity to ask questions during church services and to meet separately to further explore matters of faith. One of those who hosted such gatherings in Boston was Anne Hutchinson. John Winthrop later recalled that Mrs. Hutchinson's "ordinary talk was about the things of the Kingdom of God," and that she conducted herself always "in the way of righteousness and kindness."^[6] Her voice was but one among many as the godly sought to better understand their relationship with God. But the congregation was united by what one scholar has correctly identified as "mutual forbearance [and] common standards of behavioral orthodoxy," the success of the elders in managing a "well-functioning, satisfying church," and the shared sense of many members that they were one in helping to achieve the kingdom of God on earth. This unity also depended on a "tolerance for linguistic idiosyncrasies among people perceived as godly."^[7] There is no indication prior to 1636 that anyone in that church found anything troubling about these exchanges.

Excited by the freedom to worship and debate as they wished, some of the members of the Boston congregation abandoned the caution with which many customarily pursued the secrets of God's work. Most puritans believed that sanctification was the restoration of the righteousness that Adam had when originally created. Boston newcomers William Dyer and Henry Vane denied this, Dyer arguing that Adam had not been made in the image of God, and Vane similarly asserted that Adam had never received the seal of the spirit. Anne Hutchinson likewise questioned whether God's image in Adam consisted in holiness. She may have also been drifting towards anti-Trinitarianism by questioning the eternal sonship of Christ. She believed that she was directly inspired by the spirit in her understanding of scripture. She, Vane, and others who claimed a union with the holy spirit were worried that the emphasis many clergy and laypeople placed on behavior indicated that they were in danger of drifting into a reliance on the antichristian covenant of works (the idea that men could earn salvation by their actions). Critics felt that Vane and Hutchinson were suggesting that the presence of the spirit made the instructions of scripture superfluous.

All of this was anathema to Thomas Shepard, the minister of the nearby town of Newton (soon to be renamed Cambridge), and it was he who first sought to brand some of those views as heterodox. Shepard took it upon himself to act the part of heresy hunter in attacking what he was convinced were the false teachings of Boston pastor John Cotton and the erroneous beliefs of his disciples. By doing so he initiated a process of polarization where individuals of various opinions gradually abandoned dialogue and began to hurl negative labels at one another with about as much accuracy as one finds in modern political campaigns. Simplify, exaggerate, and demonize your opponents became the strategy adopted by both emerging camps. As each side came to believe the categorization they had shaped to define their opponents, they hardened their own stance in ways that must have surprised anyone who had observed the dialogue and tolerance that once categorized the affairs of the colony. It is important to note that Hutchinson and her most zealous supporters were not seeking the right to simply hold to their own positions in peace. They actively asserted that the majority of clergy were preaching false doctrine that needed to be prohibited. As with Roger Williams, the dissenters were as intolerant of their opponents as their opponents were of Hutchinson.

Shepard and Thomas Dudley played the lead roles in trying to condemn errors and narrowly define what would be acceptable in the puritan city on a hill. It was Shepard who mobilized the majority of ministers in the region to oppose the doctrines originating in Boston and threatening to infect members of their own congregations. Dudley played a key role in the prosecution of Anne Hutchinson during her civil trial in 1637. At one point Dudley sought to implicate John Cotton in her views in a way that would have made it

impossible for that clergyman to remain in Massachusetts, but Winthrop cut Dudley off before he could proceed down that road. Winthrop clearly was focused on keeping Cotton within the perimeter fence of orthodoxy. Shepard also played a decisive role in the separate church trial that led to Anne's excommunication from the Boston congregation.

Despite their successes, Dudley and Shepard did not achieve all they hoped for. Winthrop helped to create a middle way that was broad enough to save Cotton and others who had originally dabbled in the controversial views. While the perimeter fence defining orthodoxy was not redrawn to encompass as much variety of expression as Winthrop would have liked to include, it was not drawn as rigidly as Dudley and Shepard would have wished.

Today's students need to avoid the error made by the protagonists in the puritan debates of simplifying the positions taken by the various figures in the controversy. We also need to avoid interpreting the events in terms of twenty-first century values. There is no question that the values and concerns of men and women like Winthrop, Dudley, Williams, and Hutchinson are different from ours. But focusing on how they sought to define the limits of their society may help us to understand our own struggles to define the limits of acceptable belief and behavior.

[1] I have borrowed the term from Alexandra Walsham, who uses it in her excellent analysis of *Charitable Hatred: Tolerance and Intolerance in England, 1500–1700* (Manchester, England: Manchester University Press, 2006).

[2] While “Puritan” and “Puritanism” are often capitalized by American authors, I believe that using the forms “puritan” and “puritanism” serve as a reminder that there was never a settled puritan church or set of official doctrines; puritanism was a movement rather than a static or established institution.

[3] John Winthrop, “A Model of Christian Charity,” which may be found in *Winthrop Papers, Volume 2: 1623–1630* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1931) and on many online sites.

[4] Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle, eds., *The Journal of John Winthrop 1640–1649* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), 44.

[5] Anne Bradstreet, “To The Memory of My Dear and Ever-Honored Father, Thomas Dudley,” in Jeannine Hensley, ed., *The Works of Anne Bradstreet* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1967), 203.

[6] John Winthrop, *A Short History of the Rise, Reign, and Ruin of the Antinomians, Familists, and Libertines* (1644), in David D. Hall, ed., *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636–1638* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990), 308.

[7] Michael P. Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636–1641* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 62.

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