

John Winthrop: A Shield Unto the Churches

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Prologue: The Inner Life of a Public Man

I would like to begin with an extract from the diary of our subject. John Winthrop wrote these words before he came to America while serving as a county justice in England. They provide us with a glimpse into the heart of a man known to history primarily for his service in government.

O my lord, my love, how wholly delectable art thou! Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth, for his love is sweeter than wine. How lovely is thy countenance! How pleasant are thy embraces! My heart leaps within me for joy when I hear the voice of thee, my Lord, when thou say to my soul thou art her salvation. O my God, my king, what am I but dust!—a worm, a rebel, & thine enemy was I wallowing in the blood and filth of my sins, when thou didst cast the light of thy countenance upon me, when thou spreadest over me the lap of thy love, and say that I should live. Then thou didst wash me in the ever flowing fountain of thy good. Thou did trim me as a bride prepared for her husband... Wholly thine I am (my sweet Lord Jesus), unworthy (I acknowledge) so much honor as to wipe the dust off the feet of my Lord..., yet wilt thou honor me with the society of thy marriage chamber. Behold, all ye of the Lord, know and embrace with joy this unspeakable love of his towards you. God is love, assuredly.¹

Consider that the man who wrote these rhapsodic words of devotion was the first governor of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. John Winthrop's spiritual passion does not square at all with our contemporary image of a politician. His words are a forceful reminder that colonial New England was a world much different than our own. To understand the relation of church and state in seventeenth century Massachusetts we need to set aside much of our modern outlook and try to enter into the colonists' way of thinking.

¹ Francis J. Bremer, *John Winthrop: America's Forgotten Founding Father* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 110.

The Puritan View of the Magistrate's Role

The title of my presentation was suggested by something in Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana*, his history of colonial New England. The section of his history which gives the biographies of the governors of early New England entitled *Ecclesiarum Clypei*, "The Shields of the Churches."² Mather was using an image for the role of civil authority in relation to the churches that came naturally to him. He saw the civil magistrate as being a protector and defender of the wellbeing of the churches. This is obviously not an image we would use today. We see government as taking a position of careful neutrality with regard to religious bodies. Thomas Jefferson's phrase about the "wall of separation" between church and state is commonly used as a description of the relationship that ought to exist. Contemporary Americans, if they know anything about church and state in colonial days, are apt to see the Puritans of New England as being hopelessly muddled about this relationship. They have heard that Massachusetts actually banished two famous individuals, Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, for their religious views, and react with indignation at the narrow-minded theocrats who could do such a thing. However, the action taken against these two people was seen as entirely proper by both the religious and civil authorities of that era. To them the views of these individuals threatened the unity and harmony of the churches and thus were a threat to the social fabric which merited intervention by the magistrate.

We are apt to project our contemporary understanding of church-state relationships back on the New England Puritans, but to understand their view of the magistrate's role we need to remember how different their situation was from our own. The founders of the New England colonies had no intention of founding a new nation. They were founding small colonies, each

² Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, 2 vols. (Hartford: Silas Andrus, 1853; reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1979), 1:105.

responsible for its own self-government. The issues involved in governing a large pluralistic nation did not enter into their thinking. Massachusetts in 1640 had a population of around twelve thousand and consisted of twenty-four towns.³ They were citizens of England, subjects of the king. They brought assumptions about church life with them based on their English background. Back then in England there were no denominations as we understand them today. There was one church, the Church of England. The New England colonists did not continue an episcopal form of church government in America, but they brought with them the assumption that each congregation was a church of the same kind, with all sharing a common faith. As they saw things, there were just Christian churches, not different kinds of Christians. They saw religious groups outside the established church in much the same light as we see cults today, as being full of aberrant, soul-destroying teaching. We see religion as a private, personal matter and the existence of any particular religious organization as something in which the state has no particular interest. They saw the churches as being foundational to the social fabric, and a threat to the unity of the churches as a threat to society. They did not see religious pluralism as something that was necessary or even desirable to their colonies. The colonies had been established by groups of people sharing a common religious vision, and the colonies existed for the furtherance of that vision. As small, fragile colonies on the edge of a vast wilderness, unity was essential for their very survival. Preserving that unity was a vital concern of the magistrates.

The Savoy Declaration was published in 1658, ten years after the death of John Winthrop. He would have been in agreement with its basic conception of the role of the magistrate, but in all likelihood he would have felt that it did not go far enough. The Savoy is an English document, and the perspective and experience of the Congregationalists of New England

³ Bremer, 324.

was different from their counterparts across the Atlantic. Winthrop, like the Savoy, understood that the magistrate should play a protective and supportive part in the life of the churches. But his understanding of the magistrate's role in protecting the interests of religion would have been even more expansive than what is described in the Savoy. The ministers of New England evidently saw the Savoy's statement as not being strong enough. The Savoy describes the magistrate as "bound to encourage, promote, and protect the professors and profession of the Gospel, and to manage and order civil administrations in due subserviency to the interest of Christ in the world,"⁴ including the prevention of the publication of blasphemy and errors, but it does not address the judicial remedies to be pursued for such violations. The ministers of New England in the Confession of 1680 and the Saybrook Declaration of 1708 felt the need to revise this whole section, giving a more detailed description of the sort of offenses which "are destructive to the external peace and order which Christ hath established in the church," including a statement that those who are guilty of such offenses "may be called to an account; and proceeded against by the censures of the church, and by the power of the civil magistrate."⁵

Winthrop's views on the role of the magistrate would have been better expressed by the Cambridge Platform. This was an American product, which grew out of the experience and practice of the New England colonists. As governor, Winthrop approved the calling of the synod which produced it,⁶ and it was published shortly before Winthrop's death. The Cambridge Platform assigns even more extensive powers to the magistrates in ecclesiastical matters than the Savoy, giving them the power to call a synod,⁷ and to regulate the observance of the duties

⁴ Savoy Declaration 24.3.

⁵ Williston Walker, *Creeeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Scribners, 1893; reprint ed., Philadelphia/Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960), 393-94 n. 5.

⁶ Bremer, 375.

⁷ Cambridge Platform 16.3.

commanded in the first table of the law as well as the second.⁸ The Cambridge Platform pointedly declares, “The end of the magistrate’s office is not only the quiet and peaceable life of the subject in matters of righteousness and honesty, but also in matters of godliness; yea of all godliness.”⁹

The differences between the confessional statements of the American Congregationalists and that of their counterparts across the Atlantic in the Savoy reflect the differences that existed in their experience and their position in society. The Americans were writing out of their experience and the requirements of actually governing a colony. The statements of the English Congregationalists, never having had the experience of running a government, were coming from a theoretical perspective. The Savoy also reflects the religious pluralism that was developing in England, a development that filled the American Puritans with alarm. The Savoy affirms toleration for those who are “not disturbing others in their ways or worship that differ from them.”¹⁰ while the American modifications of the Savoy only affirm toleration for those who are “duly observing the rules of peace and order.”¹¹ As America Congregationalists looked across the Atlantic, they increasingly saw “a Congregationalism in which each church was free to revel in whatever heresy it chose,”¹² a situation of which they could not approve. Heresy looked much more threatening in New England than in old England, requiring a more strenuous response from civil authority.

Organizing and Defining the Bay Colony

⁸ CP 17:6.

⁹ CP 17.6.

¹⁰ SD 24.3.

¹¹ Walker, 394.

¹² Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma*, 2nd ed., (Longman, 1999), 164.

Winthrop's role in the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony was immense. His writing and personal influence did much to define the character of the colony. The motivation behind the establishment of Massachusetts made it different from most efforts at colonization. David Hackett Fischer (a secular historian) observes, "The great migration developed above all as a religious movement of English Christians who meant to build a new Zion in America. When most of these emigrants explained their motives for coming to the New World, religion was mentioned not merely as their leading purpose. It was their only purpose."¹³ John Winthrop played a key role in insuring that this would be the character of the colony he would govern. He drew up a list of reasons to be considered for justifying the proposed plantation in New England, and his rationale is all couched in terms of service to the church. Here are some extracts: "It will be a service to the church of great consequence to carry the gospel into those parts of the world....Seeing the church hath no place left to fly into but the wilderness, what better work can there be than to go before and provide tabernacles and food for her...What can be a better work and more honorable and worthy of a Christian than to help raise and support a particular church while it is in the infancy? ...If any such who are known to be godly and live in wealth and prosperity here shall forsake all this to join themselves to this church and to run a hazard with them of a hard and mean condition, it will be an example of great use."¹⁴ It is striking that he repeatedly refers to the proposed colony as a church. It would be hard to apply our usual distinctions of church and state to such a settlement.

As plans for the colony developed, Winthrop emerged as the consensus choice to be governor. Winthrop was formally elected as governor by the board of the Massachusetts Bay

¹³ David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University, 1989), 18.

¹⁴ Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco, eds. *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology* (Cambridge, Mass./London, Harvard, 1985), 71-72.

Company on October 20, 1629.¹⁵ As such it was his responsibility to procure all the provisions and supplies the colony would need. Along with securing material goods, he was given the task of providing godly clergy. He held a meeting in London for the purpose of recruiting ministers.¹⁶

Winthrop's most famous part in the establishment of the vision that animated the Bay Colony was a sermon he preached. Again we see that the usual distinctions we make between religion and politics are blurred when it comes to the Massachusetts Bay Colony. We would find it unusual for a governor to preach a sermon. Winthrop was not ordained, and the duties and rights of the clergy were clearly distinguished from those of civil authority. The Cambridge Platform declares, "As it is unlawful for church officers to meddle with the sword of the magistrate, so it is unlawful for the magistrate to meddle with the work proper to church officers."¹⁷ Nevertheless "prophesying" by lay members of the church was commonly practiced,¹⁸ so it was not unusual for John Winthrop to deliver a sermon to the colonists as they were preparing to sail for America. The exact circumstances in which Winthrop delivered "A Model of Christian Charity" have been lost. It seems to have made more of an impression upon succeeding generations than it did on his contemporaries, but it expresses the common view that united the settlers of Massachusetts. Those migrating to New England were "a company professing ourselves fellow members of Christ." The goals of the colony were "to improve our lives, to do more service to the Lord," and to increase...the body of Christ whereof we are members, so that ourselves and our posterity may be the better preserved from the common corruptions of this world" and "serve the Lord and work out our salvation under the power and

¹⁵ Bremer, 160.

¹⁶ Ibid., 163-64.

¹⁷ CP 17.5.

¹⁸ Bremer, 198.

purity of his holy ordinances.”¹⁹ In the most famous passage in this sermon, Winthrop makes it clear that this colony is intended to be a model Christian community. “We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, when ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies; when he shall make us a praise and glory that men shall say of succeeding plantations, ‘The Lord make it like that of New England.’ For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill.”²⁰

People today are critical of early New England for not establishing religious toleration, but the settlers of Massachusetts did not intend to merely create a setting which in the flourishing of religion in general would be possible. Samuel Logan wrote of Winthrop, “He came to establish a holy community that would so glorify God by its obedience to his word that the nations round about, particularly the English nation, would see and repent and be healed.”²¹ He observes, “Winthrop’s value priorities are clear: obedience to God and the honoring of his name—these were to be the foundation of the new community.”²² Winthrop’s role in the new colony was something more powerful and enduring than the enforcement of the law. His eloquent writing shaped the vision that inspired and united the colony through its difficult early days, and it continues to influence our nation’s understanding of its role in history and in the world.

Church and State in Colonial Massachusetts

Although colonial Massachusetts is frequently referred to as a theocracy today, this description is not accurate if that term means a government run by religious authorities claiming divine sanction for their political leadership. None of its elected officials were clergymen. “As

¹⁹ Ibid., 178.

²⁰ Heimert and Delbanco, 91.

²¹ Samuel T. Logan, Jr., “New England Puritans and the State,” in *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique*, ed. William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 363.

²² Ibid., 364.

long as Winthrop lived, ministers neither sought not obtained government office.”²³ After the election of an elder of the Boston church as one of the assistants to the governor in 1632, questions were raised about whether he could hold that position and still continue as a church officer. After the congregation consulted with other churches about the question, the man resigned as church elder.²⁴ The ministers of the colony played an advisory role to the government. On election days it became customary for a leading clergyman to be invited to deliver an election sermon.

One common way that collaboration between the civil authorities and the churches would occur was the calling of days of fasting or thanksgiving by the government as occasions arose. Days of fasting and humiliation were called whenever division and strife in the colony were evident. Such attempts to bring about a spiritual resolution to crises would precede whatever civil action might finally be taken. A court-appointed fast day was held on January 19, 1637 as tensions over the views advocated by John Wheelwright and Anne Hutchinson were increasing.²⁵ Colony-wide days of thanksgiving were called in the 1630s to mark the arrival of new ships with no loss of passengers and to note the successes of the Protestant forces in the Thirty Years War.²⁶

The Puritans believed that the magistrate had the authority to call synods to resolve dispute within the churches. Such a synod was called in 1637 during the controversy about sanctification as an evidence of justification in order to have the ministers of the colony define

²³ Morgan, 84.

²⁴ Bremer, 222.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 289.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

and distinguish heresy and orthodoxy on the theological issues in dispute.²⁷ Another synod called in 1646 led to the drafting of the Cambridge Platform.²⁸

Religion was directly involved in the issue of voting rights. On May 13, 1631 the General Court made a decision that only members of a church would be voting members of the commonwealth. “These actions effectively transformed the Massachusetts Bay Company from a financial organization to an explicitly religious one.”²⁹ The restriction of the franchise to church members is a way that the political situation in colonial Massachusetts is dramatically different from our own.

While John Winthrop and his Puritan colleagues had an unwavering commitment to the authority of Scripture and sought to live by it, they did not simply adopt the Mosaic legal code as their own. They did not make every offense for which the Law of Moses decreed the death penalty a capital offense in Massachusetts. Samuel Logan summarizes their approach: “While they took the Old Testament judicial law and its penal sanctions with utmost seriousness, they sought to determine from all the evidence at hand—the New Testament, their experience with the English legal system, their specific circumstances in New England, their perceived place in the ongoing work of the kingdom of Christ—what should be adopted, what should be adapted, and what should be omitted.”³⁰ He describes “studied flexibility” as the best way to characterize their use of the Mosaic judicial law.³¹

Someone surprisingly to us, Winthrop resisted the creation of a complete code of law for Massachusetts. John Cotton drew up a law code based on the Law of Moses, but Winthrop and

²⁷ Ibid., 295.

²⁸ Ibid., 375.

²⁹ Logan, 368.

³⁰ Ibid., 383.

³¹ Ibid.

the other magistrates did not embrace it. Morgan explains their thinking: “It was not that they wanted no laws at all, but that they wanted the laws to arise out of judicial decisions rather than out of wholesale legislative enactments.... Much better to leave the magistrates a free hand. Let them search the Scriptures for the proper rule in each case as it arose. The decisions would be recorded, and when a similar case arose in the future, the judges could hark back to it and be guided by it.”³² Thus a process similar to that which had formed the common law of England would form the laws of Massachusetts. This is what Winthrop preferred, but the deputies of Massachusetts wanted something more definite. When a code of liberties was finally drawn up by Nathaniel Ward and adopted by the General Court in 1641, Winthrop did not oppose it. His journal recorded its acceptance without comment.³³

Winthrop as Governor

Having given this background on the way Winthrop would have understood his authority, let us look at how he exercised it during his career. Winthrop’s style of governing involved close cooperation with the ministers of the colony. He would ask for input from the ministers on public issues that arose, and the churches would request his help when conflicts arose between them. The way he dealt with problems that occurred in the churches is illustrated by an incident that occurred in the early days of the Massachusetts colony. In 1631 George Phillips, the pastor of the Watertown church, a former neighbor of Winthrop’s in England, suddenly was expressing the view that not only the churches of England but those of Rome as well were true churches. His views were dividing the church. Winthrop went to Watertown and debated before the congregation against Phillips and Richard Brown, a ruling elder who supported Phillips.

Winthrop convinced the congregation to formally condemn Phillips’ view, but they did not take

³² Morgan, 149-50.

³³ *Ibid.*, 154.

action against him. A few months later problems arose again out of reaction against the too tolerable view of Catholicism. Since elder Brown had an erroneous opinion some church members did not feel they could remain as communicants in the same church as him. Winthrop went to Watertown again, this time to convince the purists they had gone too far. Winthrop was able to bring about a general reconciliation, but one of the purists still refused to take communion with Brown. He was finally excommunicated for his obstinacy, which led to his repentance and final reconciliation with the church.³⁴ The outcome of this incident would have been satisfying to Winthrop. He intervened before the situation got out of hand, and he did not have to prosecute anyone. He was able to reason with the members of the church, and they finally dealt with the problem themselves. Winthrop's handling of this situation was what would be typical for him. When disputes arose in churches, he would try to consult with the members informally and try to bring about a solution that did not require official action.

Winthrop and Roger Williams

Winthrop's dealings with Roger Williams and his extreme separatist views illustrate both the way that some religious opinions could become a problem for the peace and harmony of the colony and Winthrop's methods in handling disputes. Roger Williams arrived in Boston in the spring of 1631 and was welcomed by the church there. This was the congregation in which John Winthrop held his membership. Winthrop would even exercise his gift of prophesying there from time to time during the pastor's absence.³⁵ Pastor John Wilson had returned to England to bring back his wife, and Williams was invited to supply the pulpit in his absence. Williams declined, explaining that he could not serve them unless the church members would formally express repentance for their previous communion with the Church of England. In response to

³⁴ Ibid., 87.

³⁵ Bremer, 198.

Williams, Winthrop wrote a paper on “Reformation without Separation.”³⁶ Winthrop apparently convinced his fellow church members not to yield to Williams’s terms, and Williams moved on to Salem. Before leaving Boston Williams expressed the opinion that civil magistrates had no authority in any religious matter, not even in requiring people to keep the Sabbath.³⁷ The people of Salem were soon ready to call Williams as the pastor. “Once again his charm and earnestness found an immediate response.”³⁸ Winthrop wrote a letter to John Endecott, an influential resident of Salem, “marveling” that the Salem church would chose a teacher with such dangerous views. The congregation withdrew its offer, and Williams departed for Plymouth, which he believed must be more committed to Separatism.

Plymouth proved to be a disappointment to Williams. It did not turn out to be as separatist as he had hoped. He discovered that when some members of the Plymouth colony visited England they would attend services of the Church of England. He did not feel he could continue as part of such an unseparated group. Winthrop intervened in one controversy created by Williams during his stay in Plymouth. The title of “Goodman” was customarily used to refer to yeoman, those not entitled to be called “Master” but those higher in status than common laborers. Williams insisted that it was wrong to call any unregenerate person “good.” Winthrop and Boston pastor John Wilson happened to be visiting Plymouth. Winthrop was able to convince the Plymouth colonists that “Goodman” was just a custom of civility and did not imply spiritual goodness.³⁹

After leaving Plymouth in 1633 Williams returned to Salem, where he continued to enjoy much sympathy. He was not given any official office in the church, but functioned as an

³⁶ Ibid., 199.

³⁷ Morgan, 105.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Bremer, 222.

unofficial assistant to the pastor. In this way the church hoped to enjoy his services and avoid any trouble with the government. But Williams was soon expressing troublesome views once again. He argued that the colonists had no valid claim to the land on which they settled because the king had no authority to grant them a title. He also charged the king with blasphemy for referring to Europe as Christendom. The magistrates were horrified by the views of Williams and ordered him to appear the next General Court to be censured. Winthrop was able to defuse the crisis. He wrote to John Endecott in Salem describing the charges to be laid against Williams and suggesting arguments that might be used to make Williams reconsider. Williams appeared at the court in a penitent spirit, and assured the court of his loyalty. No action was taken against him at this time.⁴⁰

But Williams could not refrain from stirring up controversy. In November 1634 Williams was once again teaching that the king's patent was invalid and the churches of England were anti-Christian. He was summoned once again to appear before the court. In the meantime he continued making shocking pronouncements. He said that Massachusetts should return its patent to the king, insisting that it be all clauses referring to the donation of the land be removed. Unless this were done, he declared, all the settlers of Massachusetts would be honor bound to return to England and publicly acknowledge their sin of coming to New England under false pretenses. A consultation with ministers convinced Williams to drop his attack on the colony's charter and not to send a letter to the king accusing him of lying, but further controversy was to follow.⁴¹

He was summoned before the court for declaring that a required loyalty oath would be taking the name of the Lord in vain because a regenerate magistrate might administer the oath to

⁴⁰ Ibid., 235.

⁴¹ Morgan, 109-110.

an unregenerate man, thereby joining with him in worship. Williams had enough support in this that charges against him were dropped, along with the requirement of taking the oath.⁴² He continued to express controversial views, escalating his views as to the requirements of purity of churches and of Christian individuals. He declared that a regenerate man ought not to pray in company with an unregenerate man, not even with his wife and children, and that he ought not give thanks after meals, even the Lord's Supper. He also repeated the view he had expressed in 1631 that the magistrate could not punish breaches of the first table of the law.⁴³

The Salem church still supported him, despite the increasing extremism of his views. Things came to a head when they chose Williams to be their pastor after the death of their pastor Samuel Skelton in 1635, knowing that this would not sit well with the Massachusetts authorities. He was summoned to appear before the General Court in July 1635. He was advised that the other churches were about to write to the Salem church to admonish him of his errors and that his views were "adjudged by all magistrates and ministers to be erroneous and very dangerous," and that the church's "calling of him to office was judged a great contempt of authority," and that if he continued to obstinately hold such opinions the other churches should request the magistrate to remove him.⁴⁴

John Cotton and other ministers spent the summer trying to convince Williams of his errors. The magistrates put pressure on the church in another way. Salem was petitioning the General Court for some additional land, and the court refused to grant the petition unless the

⁴² Ibid., 110.

⁴³ Ibid., 111.

⁴⁴ Bremer, 250.

congregation dismissed Williams. The outraged church sent letters to the other churches urging them to reprimand the magistrates for their “heinous sin.”⁴⁵

It appeared that they were headed toward a rebellion of the Salem church against all the other churches of the colony. The crisis was averted when Williams, with his characteristic self-assurance and high-handedness, declared that the other churches had given up the principle of congregational independence by calling for the civil authorities to act against the church. He declared that his church must now renounce the other churches of Massachusetts, and unless they did so, he would be obliged to withdraw from the Salem church. Not many in the Salem church were willing to go this far.

In October 1635 Williams was called before the General Court to answer for his denial of the magistrate’s authority in civil matters, and for two seditious letters, one addressed to the other churches accusing the magistrates of oppressive policies and another written to his own church denouncing the other churches as anti-Christian. He was ordered to leave the colony in six weeks. Because Williams was ill, the court deferred execution of his sentence provided he did not continue speaking out on disputed issues. He could not refrain from doing this, so finally Williams was ordered to be sent to England immediately. When the party arrived to take Williams into custody, they discovered the Williams had fled.⁴⁶

John Winthrop did not play a leading role in the banishment of Roger Williams. He had been replaced as governor by Thomas Dudley in 1634, so he was one of the assistants at the time Williams was sentenced. Winthrop did play a surprising role in the final outcome of the Roger Williams controversy. Despite their theological differences Williams and Winthrop had a

⁴⁵ Morgan, 112.

⁴⁶ Bremer, 251.

friendly relationship and kept up a correspondence.⁴⁷ Years later, in 1670 Williams wrote in a letter, “When I was unkindly and unchristianly driven from my house and land and wife and children...that ever honored Governor Mr. Winthrop privately wrote to me to steer my course to the Narragansett Bay and Indians, for many high and heavenly and public Ends, encouraging me from the freeness of the place from any English claims or patents. I took his prudent motion as a hint and voice from God.”⁴⁸ It was the suggestion of John Winthrop that evidently led Williams to select the site of what would become Rhode Island.

Winthrop and Anne Hutchinson

John Winthrop was more closely involved in the other famous instance of banishment in colonial Massachusetts. In the case of Anne Hutchinson Winthrop felt compelled to use measures he normally was reluctant to employ. He was slow to take legal action to address a problem. When troubling views were being voiced, he would try to act quickly and unofficially to resolve an issue before it went too far. He preferred to reason with potential disturbers of the peace, and when theological issues were involved, would call upon ministers to confer with individuals concerned. With Anne Hutchinson, however, measures of this sort proved ineffective and he took an active role in her trial and banishment, and later published a book to defend the action the colony took against her. The conflict with Hutchinson hit close to home. She attended the same church as he did, and her teachings were causing turmoil in it.

Anne Hutchinson arrived in Boston in 1634. She came over to Massachusetts specifically in order that she might continue to sit under the ministry of her pastor John Cotton, whose preaching she valued highly. Beside Cotton’s preaching she also admired that of her

⁴⁷ Ibid., 252.

⁴⁸ Morgan, 115; Bremer, 251.

brother-in-law John Wheelwright. She prized their preaching because she felt that “they disdained a legalist approach to salvation and preached assurance of salvation gained through the seal of the Spirit.”⁴⁹ When Cotton and Wheelwright were silenced by the bishops she felt that “there was none in England that I durst hear,”⁵⁰ so she felt that she had no choice but to emigrate.

John Winthrop shared with Anne Hutchinson an appreciation for John Cotton’s preaching. Winthrop felt, as many of the members of the Boston church did, that Cotton’s ministry had revitalized their church. Cotton emphasized God’s free grace in salvation and the futility of works in gaining righteousness. Winthrop recorded his gratitude to Cotton for rousing him from what he felt had been a condition of spiritual sleepiness. He noted that “the doctrine of free justification lately taught here took me in as drowsy a condition, as I had been in (to my remembrance) these twenty years, and brought me as low (in my own apprehension) as if the whole work had been to begin anew. But when the voice of peace came I knew it to be the same that I had been acquainted with before.”⁵¹ If Anne Hutchinson had simply endorsed the free grace preaching of John Cotton she would have continued on as a respected and valued member of the congregation. Many members of the church came to the weekly meetings held at her home to discuss the Sunday sermon, and such meetings were an accepted part of church life in the Puritan churches.

But at the meetings at her home Anne Hutchinson was taking the teaching that salvation was all of grace in a dangerous direction. She denied that living a righteous life was of any value as evidence that one was saved. No Puritan minister would have claimed that a righteous life was a certain proof of having received salvation. There was always the possibility of hypocrisy,

⁴⁹ Bremer, 179.

⁵⁰ Morgan, 120.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 121-22.

but a good life would give probable evidence that one was in a state of grace. Hutchinson believed that only the inner witness of the Holy Spirit was evidence of salvation. Hutchinson and her followers believed that any justified person could discern whether or not another person was saved. They confidently pronounced any person they encountered as “under of covenant of grace” or “under a covenant of works.” Winthrop observed, “It began to be as common here, to distinguish between men, by being under a covenant of grace or a covenant of works, as in other countries between Protestants and Papists.”⁵² Hutchinson began to suggest to her followers that all the Massachusetts ministers, with the exception of John Cotton and John Wheelwright, were under a covenant of works and therefore unfit to preach the gospel. Many in the Boston congregation, including some of its most influential members, notably Henry Vane, the current governor, were following Hutchinson.⁵³ Meanwhile other ministers in the colony were becoming alarmed at what they saw happening in Boston. Thomas Shepard, minister in Newtown (Cambridge), suspected that John Cotton was teaching heresy and presented him with a list of questions intended to clarify his teaching and expose possible errors. In a series of sermons Shepard warned against those who would seek a mystical style assurance of salvation and neglect the normal means of grace. Because of the suspicions about their orthodoxy, Cotton and Wheelwright were called to defend their orthodoxy before the General Court in October 1636.⁵⁴ They answered to the satisfaction of the court, but the tensions between the Boston church and the other churches and clergy of the colony continued to grow.

The supporters of Anne Hutchinson were strong enough in the Boston congregation to try to get an official spokesman for their views in their church. At a church meeting in October

⁵² Ibid., 124-25.

⁵³ Ibid., 126.

⁵⁴ Bremer, 285.

1636 they moved that John Wheelwright be called as co-teacher of the congregation, to join John Cotton and John Wilson. Winthrop was sufficiently concerned about Wheelwright's views that he opposed his call and was able to block it at the congregational meeting.⁵⁵ Winthrop's opposition to Wheelwright produced much resentment from Wheelwright's admirers. Followers of Anne Hutchinson were not content to keep their views within the Boston church. They began to visit other congregations and heckle the ministers. Tensions between the Boston church and other congregations rose to such a pitch that the General Court called for a fast in January 1637 to mourn for their dissensions. Most ministers used the occasion to preach on the need for peace and reconciliation, but John Wheelwright chose to go in a different direction. Following the afternoon lecture by John Cotton, he rose to preach a fiery sermon against those enemies of the Lord who thought that sanctification was an evidence of justification. Such holy-seeming men, he said, were under a covenant of works, and "the more holy they are, the greater enemies they are to Christ." True believers rise up to wage war upon them: "we must lay load upon them, we must kill them with the word of the Lord."⁵⁶ For this inflammatory sermon Wheelwright was convicted of sedition at the next meeting of the General Court. Sentencing was deferred until the following session in May.

This next meeting was the regular time for election of officers. The Boston church presented a petition against the conviction of the Wheelwright. The sitting governor was Henry Vane, a member of the Boston church and supporter of Wheelwright. Vane wanted to deal with the petition first, but Winthrop and the other magistrates insisted on having the election first. In this election Vane not only lost his position as governor but also his position as a magistrate. Winthrop was returned to the governor's office. The sentencing of Wheelwright was deferred

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Morgan, 128.

once again as several measures were passed to attempt to reduce the tension in the colony. Another day of fasting and humiliation was set. A synod was called to discuss the theological issues troubling the colony and define dangerous errors. Winthrop sponsored an order of the court restricting immigration out of fears that a wave of new arrivals with views similar to Wheelwright and Hutchinson might swarm into the colony. The court's order prevented any person or town from offering accommodation to any new arrival for more than three weeks without the approval of a member of the council or two magistrates.⁵⁷ Winthrop wrote "A Declaration in Defense of an Order of Court" in which he defended the action as a reasonable step for the preservation of peace and order in the colony, asserting that a commonwealth may "seek out and entertain all means that may conduce to the welfare of the body and keep off whatsoever doth appear to tend to their damage."⁵⁸

The summer months that followed were a time of great tension. Petitions in support of Wheelwright were circulated. Several protests against the actions of the court were published. Vane, the deposed governor, and his supporters gave several pointed snubs to Winthrop. Winthrop ignored them and refrained from taking harsh action against Wheelwright's supporters. He labored to convince them of their errors. "We spent much time and strength in conference with them, sometimes in private before the elders only, sometimes in our public congregation for all comers."⁵⁹ Such discussions did not change the minds of the protesters, but only seemed to increase the distance between them and the orthodox. The ministers also had repeated meetings to try to arrive at a consensus. A synod convened on August 30, 1637 and met for twenty-four days. The synod described and condemned eighty-two heretical propositions, but did not

⁵⁷ Bremer, 292.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 293-94.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 295.

identify any specific persons holding them.⁶⁰ The intent of the synod was to set forth the boundaries of acceptable belief so that those who might have gone beyond them would be warned and perhaps draw back from heretical positions. The unanimous declaration of the synod did not ease the loud defiance of a hard core of the crusaders against a covenant of works. Winthrop found himself in an uncomfortable middle position. The views disturbing the colony were centered in Boston among members of his own church, and the agitators were very unhappy with him for his efforts to suppress them. At the same time, others in the colony, notably Rev. Thomas Shepard, faulted him for being too lenient with those causing trouble and being too tolerant of their heresies.

With efforts at persuasion failing, Winthrop decided it was time for action. Wheelwright was brought before the General Court in November and upon his refusal to give up his heresies was banished and given two weeks to leave the colony.⁶¹ (Wheelwright later repented of the disturbance he had caused. He wrote a letter of apology to Winthrop and in 1644 his banishment was lifted. He continued a long career as pastor, first in Hampton, NH, then back in England, and finally in Salisbury, NH.)⁶²

Having dealt with Wheelwright, the court then brought Anne Hutchinson in for trial. “The conduct of the proceeding was very different from what we would expect in the twenty-first century but not that different from what was customary in English quarter sessions and in the court proceedings of Massachusetts in the seventeenth century. The task of the magistrates

⁶⁰ Bremer, 296; Morgan 131.

⁶¹ Bremer, 296.

⁶² William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 6 vols. (New York: Robert Carter, 1857), 1:86.

was to inquire was well as to judge, and other members of the court could interject questions and statements.”⁶³ John Winthrop led the questioning. The trial took two days.

Even though it seemed clear to the magistrates that Anne Hutchinson was the main source of the turmoil in the colony, only minor charges could be brought against her. She had made no public statements like Wheelwright, nor had she signed a petition in his favor. She could only be charged with “countenancing and encouraging” seditious persons. It was also charged that her home meetings with men and women present violated biblical prohibitions against women teaching men. The most serious charge was that she had defamed the ministers of the colony.⁶⁴ During the questioning she was defiant and sarcastic. She would not admit to saying the things she was alleged to have said. A number of ministers testified about things she had said during a meeting with her, but she stymied them by asking them to swear that their testimony was true. She knew that they would be very reluctant to do so, because if they gave testimony that proved to be false, they would be guilty not merely of perjury but of taking the Lord’s name in vain. John Cotton, the pastor she admired so much, declined to condemn her. He declared “I must say that I did not find her saying that they were under a covenant of works, nor that she said they did preach a covenant of works.”⁶⁵

Hutchinson might have escaped with only a censure from the court, but her own words proved her undoing. She attempted to justify herself by “a torrent of divine revelations.”⁶⁶ She related a string of occasions on which she believed that the Holy Spirit had provided her with direct guidance. She claimed to know “which was the clear ministry and which the wrong” by “an immediate revelation,” and that by such revelations she also knew that she would be

⁶³ Bremer, 296.

⁶⁴ Morgan, 132.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

delivered by the Lord from the court's actions. She declared that the Lord had revealed to her that if the court and colony continued in their present course, "You will bring a curse upon you and your posterity, and the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it."⁶⁷ When asked how she knew all this, he explained that it was by the same means that Abraham knew he must offer his son. "So to me by an immediate revelation...by the voice of his own spirit to my soul."⁶⁸ Out of her own mouth she gave evidence of the belief in direct inspiration beyond the words of Scripture that she had been charged with. The court soon proceeded to order her banishment. She was also excommunicated by her church. Her banishment was deferred four months because of the winter and because she was pregnant, but in March 1637 she and a few followers departed for Rhode Island. A few years later she and her family moved near present-day Rye, New York, where in August 1643 she and a dozen members of her family were killed in an Indian raid.⁶⁹

The conviction of Anne Hutchinson did not end the controversy in Massachusetts. Besides sentencing Hutchinson the court also took action against those who had criticized the treatment of Wheelwright. Some were disenfranchised and fined for their contemptuous speech toward the magistrates. The court must have been worried about the possibility of armed rebellion. They had all the colony's munitions removed from Boston, where most of the dissidents lived, to Newtown and Roxbury, and all signers of the petition objecting to Wheelwright's treatment who did not recant were ordered to hand in their "guns, pistols, swords, powder, shot, and match"⁷⁰ Winthrop regretted the outcome of the proceedings since they had been unable to win over the dissidents as he had hoped. He felt the need to defend the court's

⁶⁷ Bremer, 297.

⁶⁸ Morgan 135.

⁶⁹ David D. Hall, *The Antinomian Controversy 1636-1638: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Durham/London: Duke, 1990), 10.

⁷⁰ Bremer, 298.

actions. He gathered together a collection of relevant documents relating to the controversy and published it as *A Short Story of the Rise, Reign, and Ruin of the Antinomians, Familists and Libertines*.⁷¹ By labelling Wheelwright, Hutchinson and their supporters in this way he was associating them with some of the wilder cults that were appearing in England. He clearly felt that this was the direction their beliefs were moving, although they did not exhibit the extremes of belief and behavior that were seen in such groups. In this book he described Anne Hutchinson as “this American Jezebel.”⁷² A recent book sympathetic to Hutchinson used this description as its title.

Later Career

John Winthrop acted forcefully in 1646 to counter an attempt to force a system of church life and civil government upon the Bay Colony that was contrary to their established beliefs and practices. A petition from a group led by a physician named Robert Child was presented to the General Court calling for sweeping changes in the colony’s system. It called for closer dependence on the laws of England (and thus on Parliament), a Presbyterian-style parish system and abandonment of the requirement of regenerate membership in the churches for voting rights.⁷³ If their petition was denied, the petitioners threatened to appeal to Parliament. The changes proposed in the petition would have changed the fundamental character of the colony. Winthrop held a private conference with the petitioners in hopes that he could convince them to back down, but they insisted on a confrontation. Child and the other petitioners were fined for contempt of court and sedition. Winthrop told them that no appeal to higher authority in England would be recognized. While Child and his cohorts were preparing to sail to England to

⁷¹ Ibid., 300.

⁷² Hall, 310.

⁷³ Morgan, 180.

present their appeal, Winthrop had them seized. Their trunks were searched, and in them incriminating petitions were found, calling for the establishment of Presbyterianism and close control of the colony by England.⁷⁴ Winthrop had them held in custody until the colonial authorities could have a representative go over to England to present their side of the issue. Edward Winslow of Plymouth was delegated to go on this mission. His efforts were successful, and the English government was convinced to reaffirm the autonomy of the colonies. When Child was finally able to get over to England he found no support for his efforts. Oliver Cromwell was rising to power, and under his leadership a more sympathetic view of Congregationalism was starting to prevail.

Winthrop continued in office as governor until his death in 1649. John Cotton, his pastor, paid tribute to him in a sermon to the Boston church, referring to him as a governor “who has been to us as a friend in his counsel for all things, an help for our bodies by physic, for our estates by law.” He was, Cotton continued, “a governor who has been unto us as a brother, not usurping authority over the church, often speaking his advice...often contradicted, even by young men and those of low degree, yet not replying, but offering satisfaction also when any supposed offenses have arisen.”⁷⁵

Reflections

The close cooperation between civil and religious authority seen in the career of John Winthrop was possible because of unique providential circumstances. He was governing what was explicitly a Christian commonwealth, with the franchise limited to church members. In a religiously diverse nation with no established church such as the United States of America a

⁷⁴ Ibid., 181.

⁷⁵ Mather, 1:131.

magistrate could not expect to intervene in church disputes in the way that John Winthrop did. We may wonder how much of his example could apply to us.

Some continuity between his practices and those of our day can be seen. American Presidents have called for national days of prayer or thanksgiving. Most Presidents have made a practice of conferring with ministers on issues before the country. Although not all of our government officials would feel bound “to encourage, promote, and protect the professors and profession of the Gospel,” as the Savoy Declaration would have it, those individuals holding public office who are Christians can still seek to protect the welfare of the churches in a general sense. In 1788 the American Presbyterians amended Chapter 23 section 3 of the Westminster Confession as follows to conform to constitutional situation of the United States: “As nursing fathers, it is the duty of civil magistrates to protect the Church of our common Lord, without giving the preference to any denomination of Christians above the rest, in such a manner that all ecclesiastical persons whatever shall enjoy the full, free, and unquestioned liberty of discharging every part of their sacred functions without violence or danger.”⁷⁶ I believe that this gives helpful guidance to those magistrates who are Christian in our country today. They need to be vigilant in protecting the religious liberty of the churches from imposition by the state. In this sense they still can, and need to be, shields of the churches.

John Winthrop’s career and example remind us that government service can be an honorable calling for a Christian. The Savoy declares that, contrary to the claims of the Anabaptists, “It is lawful for Christians to accept and execute the office of a magistrate.”⁷⁷ Due to the corruption and self-seeking commonly seen among those in government, being a politician is often seen as a morally dubious pursuit today. John Winthrop’s example reminds us that it is

⁷⁶ Walker, 393-94 n. 5.

⁷⁷ SD 24.2.

possible for a conscientious Christian to serve in government in a morally upright and self-sacrificing way. Christians who aspire to government service would be well advised to study his life.