Anne Hutchinson Claims That God Has Revealed Himself to Her

In Massachusetts Bay, Anne Hutchinson held religious meetings that assaulted the Puritan practice of relegating women to the role of “man’s helper.” At the same time, her ideas promoted the importance of individual conscience, none more so than when, on trial for her beliefs, she declared that she alone could determine whether God had entered her soul.

Anne Hutchinson was born Anne Marbury in 1591 in Alford, Lincolnshire, England to Bridget Dryden and Francis Marbury, a dissenting Anglican clergyman. Exposed to theology at an early age, she became conversant in the ongoing turmoil between the Church of England, also called the Anglican church, and the Puritans, who thought the Anglicans morally corrupt and spiritually bankrupt.

In the years after she married William Hutchinson, a merchant, in 1612, Anne Hutchinson gravitated toward the preaching of John Cotton, a Puritan. When Cotton immigrated to Massachusetts Bay in 1633, she convinced her husband they should do likewise, and in 1634 the couple, along with several of their children (she had 13 altogether), journeyed across the Atlantic. Because William Hutchinson was wealthy and prominent, he received a large plot of land in Boston for his family’s house, a practice in keeping with a complex distribution system in which the amount of land a Puritan received was related, in part, to his standing in society. William Hutchinson continued to prosper as a merchant and served in public office.

Anne Hutchinson, meanwhile, further committed herself to John Cotton’s theology, finding it more spiritually fulfilling than any taught by other Puritan preachers. Puritans had for years debated the differences between two religious concepts, the covenant of grace and the covenant of works, and the relative value of each. According to the covenant of grace, only complete faith in God could possibly bring salvation; according to the covenant of works, the doing of good deeds could assist in bringing salvation. Cotton took a position halfway between these two doctrines, stating that while works could prepare a person for salvation, only faith could actually open the doors to it.

Soon after Cotton began complaining that the Puritan ministers in Massachusetts Bay were emphasizing the covenant of works, Hutchinson began holding meetings at her house. Initially, she merely led discussions relating to Cotton’s sermons. Later, rumors circulated that she had accused the ministers of teaching only the covenant of works. Such an accusation assaulted the heart of the Puritan beliefs, that faith mattered most. To accuse the Puritan ministers of teaching a covenant of works was to accuse them of being no better than the Church of England, against which the Puritan movement had originally begun as an alternative to Anglican “faithlessness.” Hutchinson’s charge struck at the power of the colony’s leaders; the ministers did not hold public office, but they wielded enormous political power and to portray them as being on the wrong path implied they should be replaced. Consequently, her claims divided the Puritan community, and in 1636 those who supported her succeeded in electing Henry Vane as the colony’s governor. Vane, the 24-year-old son of a British government official, had attended Hutchinson’s meetings.

The following year, however, the orthodox Puritans defeated Vane and elected John Winthrop. These Puritan leaders felt enormous pressure to maintain conformity in Massachusetts Bay, for they had settled the colony intending to build a harmonious and godly society superior to that which existed anywhere else—a “City Upon a Hill” for the rest of the world to emulate. To dissolve into bickering fac-
tions would disgrace Puritanism, invite God’s punishment for violating His design for them, and produce failure.

Consequently, Winthrop and his orthodox colleagues acted to end Hutchinson’s influence, first by banishing or disenfranchising her most prominent allies, and then by placing her on trial in Newton, a town where she had few supporters. They formally charged her with sedition, not against the civil magistrates, but against the ministers, an indictment that revealed the close relationship between church and state and how it was believed that to undermine one was to undermine both. Pregnant and ill, she underwent intense questioning. At one point Winthrop referred to the biblical origins of the colony’s laws when he accused her of violating the fifth commandment to “honor thy father and thy mother,” meaning she had defied authority. At another, he attacked her for teaching men—a clear violation of Puritan society’s standards that women refrain from exerting leadership.

Hutchinson denied she had ever said the ministers were preaching only the covenant of works. Nevertheless, she said, “When they preach a covenant of works for salvation, that is not truth.” Strong and assertive, Hutchinson made a startling claim in her testimony to the court: “I bless the Lord,” she said. “He hath let me see which was the clear ministry and which the wrong.”

“How do you know that was the spirit?” the court asked her.

“How did Abraham know that it was God that bid him offer his son, being a breach of the sixth commandment?” she replied.

“By an immediate voice,” the court said.

“So too me by an immediate revelation,” she responded.

“How! An immediate revelation,” the court said.

“By the voice of his spirit to my soul,” she insisted.

Thus Hutchinson had claimed that God had revealed Himself directly to her, a stance that violated the Puritan doctrine that revelation had ended with the Bible. Orthodox Puritans labeled Hutchinson a blasphemer and an antinomian, a person who believed that commands came only from God and that salvation freed an individual from the laws of church and state. As Jean Cameron notes in _Anne Hutchinson: Guilty or Not?_ (1994), to the Puritans, “if a Christian heard voices telling of God’s intentions, that was not allowable; any assurances of a specific nature must come out of scripture.” Such ideas as Hutchinson’s opened society to potential disorder, should everyone assert that they could determine God’s revelations, and with them, God’s directions, for themselves.
The court read its verdict: “Mrs. Hutchinson . . . you are banished from out of our jurisdiction as being a woman not fit for our society.” She next underwent a church trial, during which John Cotton abandoned her and rejected her claims that she had repented. She was subsequently excommunicated.

Hutchinson then settled in Rhode Island, along with her husband and children, as well as dozens of followers. When she suffered a miscarriage, rumors spread in Boston that God had punished her by causing her to give birth to a “monster.” In 1642, William Hutchins died and in 1643, after having moved near to New York City, Anne Hutchinson was killed by Indians who attacked her and her children. In his memoirs, Winthrop called it a fitting end—yet another sign of God’s retribution.

Anne Hutchinson’s radicalism manifested itself in several ways. Her religious meetings had promoted the power of the laity. At the same time, when she instructed men she challenged the male power structure. Finally, she had expressed ideas compatible with religious freedom and the concept that individual conscience mattered most. Both of these remained severely circumscribed for decades, yet the dispute raised by H utchinson portended a colony more diverse in its outlook.

Further Reading


Plockhoy Founds a Mennonite Community

In July 1663, Pieter Plockhoy and 41 other Dutch settlers arrived at the Delaware River, bringing with them their Mennonite faith and a desire to found a communitarian settlement dedicated to economic sharing, toleration, and open discussion.

Historians have long debated where to find the roots of modern American society. If one of those roots is democracy, its traces can be found in a radical group that began a short-lived communitarian settlement in seventeenth-century Delaware under Pieter Corneliszoon Plockhoy (1620?–1700?).

Plockhoy came from Zierikzee in the Netherlands and was a member of the Mennonites, a Protestant group that emphasized a spiritual life in which individuals are guided by their own consciences. The Mennonites believed in the Bible as the only religious authority, and they advocated loving their enemies and opposing war and military service.

Plockhoy was connected to the Mennonite Collegiant movement, a group from different denominations that met to discuss religious issues. The Collegiants embraced free thought and tolerance for different views, and they considered reason to be superior to any unquestioning faith in tradition.

In the late 1650s, Plockhoy visited England, where he tried to convince Oliver Cromwell, the country’s revolutionary leader, to establish a universal church tolerant of all Christians. After having failed in his mission, he published A Way Propounded to Make the Poor in These and Other Nations Happy (1659), which presented his plan for building a commune dedicated to virtue, brotherly love, and social harmony. He founded his community on Dutch territory in North America as part of a campaign by political leaders in Amsterdam to populate the land along the south Delaware River, a region remote from New Amsterdam (present-day New York City). Plockhoy and his followers departed the Netherlands in May 1663, and in July he and 41 others settled at New Amstel, near the mouth of the Delaware.