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## **Issues of Religious Freedom: Religious Minorities**

### **Anne Hutchinson**

In the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights the Founding Fathers set out to define what role the national government would play in religious matters. Would it guard the religious liberty of individuals and religious groups and guarantee that diverse religious traditions could co-exist on an equal basis? Or would religious traditions of minorities merely be “tolerated” by the religion of the majority? A prior tradition of religious conflicts and persecution in America served as valuable experience on which to draw.

One of the ironies of 17<sup>th</sup> century colonial America is that though many of the early settlers came here to escape religious oppression, they themselves were unwilling to tolerate much diversity. The treatment of Anne Hutchinson—a strong-minded and outspoken woman respected as a midwife and healer—provides a case in point.

Anne and her husband William (a successful merchant) and their family emigrated from England to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1634, following the lead of her mentor, John Cotton, a well-known Puritan minister. Within a year of her arrival, Anne was the talk of the colony, described as one who “*preaches better Gospell than any of your black-coates that have been at the Ninneverity*” [the latter referring to the black-robed male ministers educated at universities]. (Collins 29)

Anne’s teachings criticized the emphasis that Puritans placed upon a “covenant of works”—their ministers claiming that God had made a contract with Christ and upon its fulfillment God had offered salvation to just a small minority of people. Known as saints, these people had been predetermined by God to be saved (this belief is known as predestination). There was nothing a person could do to earn salvation, plus it was impossible to know whether one was “saved” or not. Anne preached instead that the individual could communicate directly with God without the assistance of a minister and that salvation could be assured (known as a “covenant of faith” or grace). This view was considered to be heresy (in opposition to the orthodox view) held by the Puritan (Congregational) Church.

When Anne began to attract sizable crowds to her home rivaling the local clergy, the male establishment could no longer ignore her. Challenged initially by a convocation of ministers, Anne was eventually summoned before the General Court of the Colony (1637). It is clear that much of the discrimination against Hutchinson related to her gender, as Governor John Winthrop’s charge at her trial confirms: “*you have maintained a meeting and assembly in your house that hath been condemned by the general assembly as a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God nor fitting for your sex*” (Kerber and DeHart 74). But her case also demonstrates how little diversity and dissension (religious or otherwise) the Massachusetts Bay Colony was willing to tolerate. In fact, “some historians believe that Anne’s battles with the establishment were not, at bottom, about religion at all, but a larger struggle between the merchant class the Hutchinsons represented and the Puritan authorities, who feared the more open and diverse society that commerce [trade] required.”(Collins 29) Plus it is clear that “the

men who came to the meetings [at the Hutchinson home] were often those critical of the Puritan leadership on political and economic as well as religious grounds.” (Kerber and De Hart 73)

At the trial Anne Hutchinson sought to defend herself on respectable grounds of both freedom of conscience and biblical authority as evident in these brief excerpts:

**Mrs. H.** *What have I said or done?*

**Governor:** *Why for your doings, this you did harbour and countenance those that are parties in this faction that you have heard of.*

**Mrs. H.** *That’s a matter of conscience, sir.*

**Governor:** *Well, admit. . .there is no warrant for your doings, and by what warrant do you continue such a course?*

**Mrs. H.** *I conceive there lyes a clear rule in Titus [Titus 2:3-5], that the elder woman should instruct the younger and then I must have a time wherein I must do it.*

(Kerber and De Hart 74-75)

However, Anne’s voice carried little weight in a legal system where women had no rights (except through their fathers or husbands) and in an era when they were barred from taking part in civic affairs. Thus at the conclusion of the trial the General Court handed down the harsh sentence of banishment from the colony. As if this were not enough, Hutchinson’s civic trial was followed by an examination before a board of ministers. Even “John Cotton, Anne’s mentor, was worked upon by the other local clergy and finally joined in their consensus that she had to be brought under control.” (Collins 29) The board of ministers levied the heaviest possible outcome: excommunication or banishment from the Congregational Church.

Once exiled, Hutchinson and her family fled to Rhode Island (where Roger Williams offered a haven for dissenters). After her husband died, Anne and her youngest children moved to an area of New York (which is now part of the Bronx) where they were killed in an Indian attack in 1643. Anne Hutchinson provides a memorable example of a time period when roles of church and state were not separated in many areas of colonial America. “The church was everything in early New England—the organizing principle around which the government, the community and the individual households revolved.” (Collins 28) How far have we come in 21<sup>st</sup> century America in keeping the functions of government and religion separate?

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#### **Sources:**

Collins, Gail. America’s Women: 400 Years of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines. New York: HarperCollins, 2003.

Kerber, Linda K. and Jane Sherron De Hart, eds. Women’s America: Refocusing the Past. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Based on this reading, be prepared to discuss the following questions:

1. Identify the time, place, and religious minority experiencing oppression.
2. Why was this group (individual) considered to be out of the religious mainstream?
3. What forms of oppression did this group (individual) experience?
4. Why did the religious majority perceive this group (individual) to be a threat to society?