

THEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE 17TH CENTURY ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY: A CASE STUDY OF ANNE HUTCHINSON

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INTRODUCTION

The Antinomian controversy, which took place between 1636 and 1638, has been variously interpreted by different scholars in contemporary times. Generally, antinomianism refers to that, “which is against or opposed to the law.”¹ Theologically, Hall wrote, antinomianism is the opinion that, “the moral law is not binding upon Christians, who are under the law of grace.”² Put succinctly, antinomians were a group of radical Puritans who taught that strict observance of moral laws were unnecessary for Christians who have embraced the salvation of God by appropriating the free grace of God given in Christ Jesus to their lives. Among the leading protagonists of antinomian school in New England were Anne Hutchinson who was staunchly supported by John Cotton, and her brother-in-law, John Wheelwright, who gathered a group of admirers around them.

Scholars such as Anne Withington, Jack Schwartz, and Richard B, Morris contended that the case against Anne Hutchinson could be considered as a “show trial” to advance and fulfill the selfish interests of the Puritan elders than the quest for true justice.³ On the other hand, scholars

¹ David D. Hall, ed. *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 3. Also see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisianist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 184.

² David D. Hall, ed. *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*, 2nd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 3.

³ Anne F. Withington and Jack Schwartz, “The Political Trial of Anne Hutchinson,” *The New England Quarterly*, LI (1978), 226-40. Richard B. Morris, *Fair Trial: fourteen who stood accused, from Anne Hutchinson to Alger Hiss* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 1952), 5-6.

such as David Hall and William K. B. Stoever attempted a critical consideration of the theological issue underpinning the controversy, especially as it related to the problem of the nature of grace.⁴ Yet other interpreters considered the antinomian controversy to be a primarily politically motivated crisis and as a struggle for democratic ideals.⁵ This paper argued that the primary reason for the antinomian controversy was theological even though it had later political implications.⁶

The Antinomian Controversy as spearheaded by Anne Hutchinson, I believe was theologically motivated for the following reasons: 1. As a Puritan, Anne Hutchinson was persuaded to emigrate to the Massachusetts Bay Colony for primarily religious reasons like other Puritans such as John Cotton, Thomas Shepard and John Wheelwright among others. 2. At the heart of the dispute with other Puritans was a theological problem rather than political – the right interpretation of the doctrine of free grace. 3. The meetings in Hutchinsons' home were meant to discuss theological matters – a further explanation of previous week's sermons and there are no documentary evidence(s) to prove that there were direct political discussions at such meetings.

In the following pages I undertook a brief biographical sketch of Anne Hutchinson then will proceed to do an in depth analysis of the theological issues surrounding the antinomian controversy within the context of Reformed/Puritan orthodoxy. In addition, I will undertake a brief discussion of the political implications of the controversy in light of the vision of the puritan elders to preserve their philosophy of the model city upon the hill.

Anne Hutchinson: A Biographical Sketch

Anne Hutchinson, was born Anne Marbury, in Alford, Lincolnshire, England, in July, 1591, the daughter of Bridget Dryden and, Francis Marbury, a deacon at Christ Church, Cambridge.⁷

⁴ David Hall, "The Antinomian Controversy," in *Anne Hutchinson: Troubler of the Puritan Zion*, ed, Fransis J. Bremmer (New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1980), 21-27. Also, William K. B. Stoever, "The Theological Dimension," in *Anne Hutchinson: Troubler of the Puritan Zion*, 28-37.

⁵ Ken L. Sarles, *Lordship, Salvation, Perseverance, And Antinomianism: A Case Study in Colonial Puritanism*; Paper presented at the 41st National Conference of the Evangelical Theological Society, held in San Diego, CA, November 16-18, 1989.

⁶ Theological issues in this paper are interpreted as all religious/biblical interpretive issues surrounding the antinomian controversy. Political implications on the other hand suggest the various activities of the state and the use of state apparatus to suppress the crisis.

⁷ Michael P. Winthrop, *The Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 6.

Anne's father believed that most of the ministers in the Church of England had not accessed their positions through proper training, but for political reasons. He so openly deplored this lack of competence from the clergy that he was arrested, and sentenced to jail for one year for his "subversive" words of dissent.⁸ Anne had read widely from her father's library having been home-schooled, which was why she was attracted to religion and theology early in life. She was influenced by her father's ideals of assertiveness and as such had no fear in raising questions about the principles of faith and the authority of the church.⁹

Anne married William Hutchinson at the age of 21, and they settled down in Alford, Lincolnshire, England where she took on the role of housewife and mother, while retaining a vivid interest in theology and the Church.¹⁰ She and her family followed the sermons of John Cotton, a Protestant minister whose teachings echoed those of her father's, but were now more commonly accepted under the increasingly popular banner of Puritanism. Anne was influenced by the teachings of the Familists that was popular in Alford and Anne was attracted to one of the prophetesses of the sect which she highly spoke of.¹¹

In 1634, when John Cotton relocated to the Puritan colonies of New England, William and Anne Hutchinson, along with their 15 children, soon followed suit, sailing to America with other colonists aboard the Griffin.¹² When Anne and her family were still living in England, she had hoped that once in America, she could discuss her faith, and would not need to hide her personal beliefs from other Puritans; but the Puritans interpretation of freedom of religion differed sharply from Anne's.

Feeling the need to discuss matters of the faith, Anne started a woman's meeting which would congregate in her home to discuss the Scriptures, pray and review sermons, but this was also the perfect forum for Anne to voice her opinions, which generated a fair amount of interest amongst both the men and women of the community, who were coming in greater numbers each week to hear her speak. Even magistrates and scholars took an interest in what she had to say. But this was to bring her into a direct clash with elders of the new colony. Anne became increasingly

⁸Michael P. Winthrop, *The Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided*, 7.

⁹Michael P. Winthrop, *The Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided*, 10.

¹⁰Michael P. Winthrop, *The Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided*, 10.

¹¹ John Emery Battis, *Saints and Sectaries: Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 42.

¹²John Emery Battis, *Saints and Sectaries*, 19.

popular a fact which worried Governor John Winthrop who denounced her gatherings, stating they were "a thing not tolerable nor comely in the sight of God, nor fitting for your sex." Anne had gained notoriety as the voice of dissent and "Antinomianism."

Anne was accused of Antinomianism. Winthrop voiced his outrage at her belief that, inner light was the guarantee of salvation, and that one needed to be knowledgeable in the Bible of Puritan texts to be worthy of salvation. Anne's opinions that the law should be interpreted by each person as his or her own conscience would dictate, and that Indian slavery and racial prejudice were wrong, also stirred quite a bit of controversy, not just with Winthrop, but with many other Puritans, who at this point could easily be convinced of Anne's heresy. Anne was convicted and sentenced to banishment from the community. Surprisingly, Anne Hutchinson still had followers, and some even decided to join her and her family on their exile to a small settlement on the island of Aquidneck. A few years later, following the death of her husband, Anne, her servants and five of her children were massacred by Mahican Indians in September of 1643 in East Chester New York.

Antinomian Crisis as a Theological Problem

One of the reasons adduced for the primacy of theological factors in the antinomian controversy is the *raison d'être* for the emmigration of the Hutchinsons to New England in 1634. As a minister's daughter Anne must have been brought up under strict religious discipline. Michael Winship speculated that coming from that background, Anne would have been taught to read the Bible early in life must have had serious drills in catechism and would have learned several scripture passages by heart.¹³ The implication is that Anne was well educated not only to read and write, but even to participate in critical and meaningful theological discourse of her time. Indeed, David Hall showed evidence to this effect in his work on the Antinomian Controversy. In this material which the dating is suspect, there was reference to Anne's writing and evidence of a signed retraction of a theological disputation.¹⁴

Apart from her education, Anne must have learned from her father's constant and harsh criticisms of the ministers of the Church of England whom he accused were preaching

¹³Michael Winship, *Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 2002), 37. Also see Jonathan Barry, "Literacy and Literature in Popular Culture: Reading and Writing in Historical Perspective," in *Popular Culture in England, c. 1500-1850*, ed. Tim Harris (New York: Scribner's, 1995), 77.

¹⁴ See John Winthrop, "A Short Story of the Rise, reign, and ruine of the Antinomians, Familists and Libertines," in *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638*, ed. David Hall, 305.

inadequate sermons capable of leading their adherents to hell. It is not unlikely that Anne's future militant and confrontational attitudes might have been learned from her father. Nevertheless, the point to be established here is that Anne had a deep rooted Christian background and was propelled by such persuasions.

Anne's association with John Cotton further strengthened her theological and religious adherence and influence to emigrate to New England. The extent to which she was close to Cotton is not known although Battis noted that Cotton reported that Anne used to visit his church. Winship argued, however that Battis' reference for such proved otherwise.¹⁵ Latter association of Anne with Cotton in New England, however, revealed a measure of closeness with Cotton. Cotton, Battis observed taught that union with Christ was the basis of assurance of salvation and "was complete before and without any work or act of faith on the part of the elect."¹⁶ The import here is that John Cotton's teachings agreed more with Anne's background and further helped her to put her theological and religious thoughts in perspective. Little wonder, Anne and her husband followed Cotton to New England following his resignation from the Church of England and his emigration to the colony. What is to be learned in this circumstance is that Anne's decision was theologically motivated. She needed a place where she could practice her faith unfettered. She needed a place that was conducive to her theological persuasion, which was impossible with the religious repression going on at that time under Archbishop Laud in England.

In like manner, much of what is known about Anne's experience before her emigration to New England came out during her trial for sedition in Massachusetts. As part of her testimony before the court, Winship wrote of what formed the basis of Anne's assurance is "absolute promise from Jeremiah 46: 27, 28" in which Anne alleged that God showed her that she was among the elect.¹⁷ This experience of the promise of God was not to last and she began to look for evidences of sanctification within her. The problem with this is that it brought her to a situation whereby she considered herself to be relying on works for her justification.¹⁸ It was against this background that Anne developed the means of assessing the preaching of the ministers in England by which she came to the conclusion that they preached the covenant of works and were

¹⁵Winship, *Making Heretics*, 38.

¹⁶ Emery Battis, *Saints and Sectaries: Anne Hutchinson and the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony*, 39.

¹⁷Winship, *Making Heretics*, 38.

¹⁸Winship, *Making Heretics*, 41.

agents of the antichrist. However, in John Cotton, Anne found a true servant of God and a person worthy to be followed on matters of faith and practice. She claimed to have received direct revelations from God, which acted as a sign of assurance of salvation.

It could be said from the foregoing that Anne Hutchinson was an avid seeker of God. She had formed certain theological beliefs that the atmosphere in London did not allow her to practice. The Massachusetts colony, Anne thought would be a fertile ground for the practice of her faith and her background would not let her rest as she sought for ways and means of fulfilling this spiritual ambition. This ambition however, was short lived because Anne was operating within a society that had no place for woman activism. Anne's problem with the elders of the colony was further deepened by the fact that her theological beliefs were opposed to those of the elders of the new colony vis-à-vis the true interpretation of the covenant of grace. It goes without saying therefore, that Anne's role in the Antinomian Controversy were formed from her religious background – Christian background, her father's confrontation with the Church of England, her personal religious experience and the influence of John Cotton all played a significant role in her later life. None of these issues can be traced to a direct political ambition, but theological

Another factor noted in the introduction as evidence of theological motive for the antinomian controversy is the issue of the covenant as it relates to the covenant of works. The antinomians accused their Puritan colleagues of operating under the covenant of works when they were to operate under the former since Christ had died for the regenerated. One may be tempted therefore to think that the problem was the issue of how to merit the grace of God in the Catholic sense or the Arminian understanding of human cooperation with grace. A critical examination of the argument from the opposing sides, however indicate that there is a more fundamental issue involved in the controversy, which William K. B. Stoever identified as the "proper relationship between the created nature and divine activity in the process of regeneration."¹⁹ John Winthrop nailed down the whole problem around two issues namely whether the Holy Spirit dwells in believers bodily or whether sanctification can be considered as an evidence of justification or not.²⁰ The point here is that could it be said that the Puritan elders were guilty of making salvation dependent on the moral codes of the Old Testament? A proper look at the teachings of the Puritan divines such as William Ames, Peter Bulkeley and John Norton shows that they are

¹⁹ William K. B. Stover, "Nature, Grace and John Cotton: The Theological Dimension in the New England Antinomian Controversy." In *Church History*, 44.1 (1975), 22.

²⁰ *Winthrop's Journal: History of New England, 1630-1649*, ed. James K. Hosmer, (New York: Scribner's, 1908), 1:195-96. Both Bulkeley and Ames held strong protestant notion of *sola gratia* and would not have preached salvation by works.

not guilty of equating salvation to Old Testament moral laws. Bulkeley for instance, believed that salvation comes not by works, but through faith in Christ as presented in the gospel.²¹

In discussing the theological dimension, however, it is important to note that the period of the controversy falls within the time frame generally referred to as the age of Reform (1570-1700) for both the Puritans of England and Massachusetts.²² Given this circumstance, it will be realized that the theology of the elders of the colony developed within this framework of Reformed orthodoxy as represented by such theological works as William Ames' *Medulla Theologica* (1623), William Perkin's *Golden Chain* (1591) among others. In Massachusetts, the works of the elders came in the form of sermons preached by the elders and it formed the basis of their theological outlook.²³ What then are the substances of these works?

Divine Sovereignty

It will be necessary to consider how the colony elders construed the concept of divine sovereignty and human activity as a way of understanding how they arrived at their view of regeneration. Reformed divines understood divine sovereignty in two ways as follows: First, God is considered to be *sui generis*. He is the first cause in relation to the world, He exists in Himself and also the whole creation depends on Him. John Norton affirms this in his *Orthodox Evangelist* in this way,

The decree is God by one eternal-free-constant act, absolutely determining the Futuration, i.e. the infallible future being of whatsoever is besides himself, unto the praise of his own glory: the cause, and disposer of all things, the Antecedent and disposer of all things. It is God decreeing; because whatsoever is in God, is God. It is God decreeing by one act; whatsoever God willeth, he willeth by one single act, hence God calleth himself I am . . .²⁴

²¹ Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel Covenant Opened or The Covenant of Grace Opened* (London: Benjamin Allen, 1646), B2.

²² The Age of Reform was concerned with defining the Reformed doctrine and articulating it within the intellectual persuasion of late medieval scholasticism. Stover, "Nature of Grace," 24.

²³ Stover, "Nature of Grace," 24.

²⁴ John Northon, *The Orthodox Evangelist*, (New York: AMS Press, 1654), 51. Also see William Ames, *The Marrow of Theology*, 1:6.

Second, the Reformed divines considered God to be the second cause, by which God uses means to achieve His predetermined will. To this extent, Stoever noted that “Reformed theologians subordinated divine power as manifest in actual order to divine will.”²⁵ The outcome of such a distinction is that Reformed theologians distinguished between “*potentia dei absoluta* and *potentia dei ordinata sive actualis*,” by which the first refers to the power of God considered in itself, and the latter his decree and revealed will.²⁶ What does this imply? Reformed theologians are of the view that God effects regeneration in the life of humanity by making use of means such as the word. Regeneration is the function of God as He acts on humanity, whereby He enlightens the unregenerate to accept His grace. The import is that although God is the first cause of regeneration, yet man has certain responsibilities by cooperating with God to ensure the regeneration of such a person. In like manner, when understood in this way, it will not be difficult to appreciate the need for preparation for salvation as taught by the elders of the colony, which leads to another important theological issue in the controversy – the concept of preparation in the process of regeneration.

Preparation

The Puritan elders taught of the need for an elaborate process of preparation for salvation based on their interpretation of the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination, which held that only God knows those who He has predestined to become an elect. The number of those who are to inherit the kingdom of God is already predetermined and there is nothing anyone can do to merit it except through the grace of God. Nevertheless, Puritan divines believed that God used the instrumentality of human understanding as an aid in the process of individual conversion. In addition, as mentioned earlier, Puritan theologians’ understanding of God is well situated within the ambits of ancient scholasticism, which is an essentially christocentric theology. Although they consider humanity to be fallen, yet God has completed the work of salvation through the sacrifice of His son, Jesus Christ, which is the basis of the covenant entered into with humanity by God.²⁷ Having embraced covenant of grace, which William Perkins described as “a contract with man, concerning the obtaining of life eternal upon a certain condition,”²⁸ covenant theology

²⁵Stoever, “Nature and Grace,” 25.

²⁶Stoever, “Nature and Grace,” 25.

²⁷ Considering the emphasis of the Reformed divines on the practical aspect of human salvation, one may be tempted to say that their teaching is essentially anthropocentric as they placed greater emphasis on salvation of the individual rather than worship and the sermon rather than the mass. Nevertheless, the center of their salvation message is the covenant of grace sealed with the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, see Jean Elizabeth Cameron, “*The Role of John Cotton in the Trials of Anne Hutchinson*” (Ph. D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1991), 16.

²⁸ William Perkins, *The Golden Chain, or the Description of theologie: Containing the order of the causes of*

Cameron recalled allowed a new twist to the questions of human participation in the conversion process.²⁹ Indeed the interpretation of the process of conversion was a prominent issue in the Antinomian Controversy.

Anne Hutchinson, following Cotton, however disagreed with the elders of the colony's view of a mediating power of God in the process of regeneration. As Cotton observed, the Spirit acts immediately in the process of regeneration by which man becomes a passive participant in the process of regeneration. Following the teaching of William Ames, Puritan clergies such as Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard and Peter Bulkeley taught a rigorous process of preparation before conversion. One of those preparatory rigors as explained by Bulkeley is baptism, which he urged many congregants to embrace.³⁰ This process of preparation often involved a long process of subjection of self to discipline and constant introspection, which was often long and psychologically exhausting; yet there was no guarantee that the process would bring the most coveted salvation. As a result, communicants often embarked on the rigorous process, which Edmund S. Morgan described as "morphology of conversion" as steps of preparation *for at least the possibility of conversion*.³¹ While one may recognize some merits in the tortuous process of conversion spelled out by the preparationists, especially as it relates to the foundation of their doctrinal belief that is well rooted in their interpretation of the Calvinist concept of salvation (which was absolutely something known by God), yet there are some problems associated with this concept.

One of the problems it posed was the psychological exhaustion and a near enslavement into which seekers of God were often plunged based on the teaching. The average believer wants to be certain that he or she has a place in heaven and indeed Scripture teaches that it is possible for one to know that he or she is saved and sealed thereof by the power of the Holy Spirit. Such an assurance that heaven is certain for them who believe is the very hope that propels the believer to patiently continue to serve God on earth even in the midst of difficulties.³² As Winship clearly

Salvation and damnation according to God's Woord, (London, John Legat, 1600), 62.

²⁹ Cameron, *The Role of John Cotton*, 51.

³⁰ See Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel Covenant Opened*. Perry Miller, also gives a good account of the concept of preparation in the 17th century Massachusetts Bay Colony.

³¹ Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1963), 15-17. Morgan also provides a detailed list of the various steps of preparation as understood in colonial Massachusetts. The list was not monolithic as they vary depending on different compilers, but they all portend a singular theological objective.

³² For example, Paul teaches in Ro 8:15 that the Spirit of God bears witness to those who have believed in the Lord

pointed out even John Winthrop, Governor, and Thomas Shepard, a leading figure in the Antinomian Controversy had their own difficult moments and frustrations with the problem of preparation and assurance of salvation.³³

Unsurprisingly, the teaching on preparation was one of the basic differences between Anne Hutchinson and John Cotton on the one hand, and Shepard, Hooker, Wilson, and Bulkeley on the other. Little wonder, preparationism became a major ground for the trial of Hutchinson later. Both Cotton and Anne objected to preparationism, and placed it effectively in the class of covenants of works. Cotton and Anne stated within their understanding of the Reformed-Calvinistic teaching that there was nothing human beings could do to merit salvation, because it was an exclusive responsibility of God. For Anne and Cotton, no human preparation no matter how great could possibly influence man's election if God had predestined those who are elects of His kingdom. It was this issue of preparation that Anne so emphasized that she tagged all preachers in the Bay Colony preachers of works covenant except Cotton. Furthermore, Cotton tried to clear the way for the Bay colony's clergies teaching that shifted the damnation of sinners on God. Cotton noted that it was the responsibility of everybody to go to church and listen to the word from where they could receive the grace of God for salvation. In this circumstance, the sinner is considered responsible for his own damnation and not God.

In the opinion of the Hutchinsons, no work no matter how good would lead to the election of the unregenerate. God performed all the action that is needed for salvation and, as such, it was possible that one may act as a model Christian and yet not be saved. Any attempt to stretch good works as evidence of salvation would amount to "works-righteousness" understood in the Puritan circles as Papist.³⁴ Thomas Hooker tried to tidy up the loose ends in the propositions of the clergies of the colonial Bay on the subject of preparation by explaining that it placed all the process of conversion in the hand of God. Such an action would make humanity to crave less for righteousness and how could an unprepared heart acquire the possibility of receiving the divine essence or salvation.³⁵

Jesus Christ as an assurance of salvation. In like manner Paul notes in Eph 1: 4, 14 that believers in Christ have been sealed with the Holy Spirit as a deposit guaranteeing their salvation and in Ro 8: 35-39, he teaches that certainty of salvation is what keeps hope alive in the believer so that such believers continue sincerely in their service to God in spite of difficulties and oppression in this world, by which he concluded that nothing can separate believers from God.

³³Winship, *Making Heretics*, 18.

³⁴ Cameron, *The Role of John Cotton*, 54.

³⁵ Thomas Hooker, *The Application of Redemption* (London: Cole, 1657; reprint, New York: Amo Press, 1972),

Some scholars, however, have argued that Puritan theologians of the seventeenth century shifted from the Calvinistic-Reformed doctrine of conversion by introducing the concept of preparation in the process of conversion in an attempt to properly explicate the doctrine of the covenant theology. The logic therein, Miller insisted is that having understood God's term of offer, a person could then place himself or herself in the position of "inclination to accept faith, should faith ever come."³⁶ Thus this idea that humanity could do something preparatory to conversion opened the way for human effort to ready oneself for the hoped state of election by God.³⁷ It was in this way that preparation became an integral process of conversion for Puritan theologians.³⁸ This was roundly condemned by Anne Hutchinson and some have described some of the Puritan divines as crypto-Arminians.³⁹ It follows from the above that the primary concerns that led to the outburst of the Antinomian Controversy were mainly theological or an attempt to arrive at a proper interpretation of some important tenets of the Reformed theological heritage such as *sola gratia* and *sola fidei*.

Assurance of Salvation

Another factor that helps one in understanding the theological roots of the Antinomian Controversy is the doctrine of assurance of salvation. How can one know that he or she has been saved? The elders of the colony like John Winthrop and Thomas Shepard held views that were opposed to those of Hutchinson. The elders staying within Calvinist-Reformed orthodoxy noted that "the certainty of one's estate may be attained short of heaven."⁴⁰ At the same time they reasoned that the issue of the election of the saint is hidden in God's heart and as such may be very difficult for one to know. Hypocrites, they say can project outward piety and put up a mood that appears as committed Christians for years and yet may not be Christians. If that is the case,

124.

³⁶ Perry Miller, "'Preparation for Salvation' in New England," in *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 4 (1943), 261.

³⁷ Perry Miller, "'Preparation for Salvation' in New England," in *The Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 4 (1943), 261.

³⁸ See Cameron, *The Role of John Cotton*, 56.

³⁹ They were so described because the argument for human efforts in preparation was considered an attempt to emphasize the efforts of humanity to attain salvation. William Stoever, however, noted that the Puritan divines could not be so labeled because they have acted well within the Reformed orthodoxy, noting that neither "Luther nor Calvin intended that the *sola gratia* to mean that God, by acting graciously to forgive and regenerate the sinner violated the ontological order of established creation, see Stoever, "John Cotton and the Nature of Grace," 33.

⁴⁰Stoever, "John Cotton and the Nature of Grace," 33.

then, the question to be answered is how can a believer be comforted at the moment of turbulence and crisis of hope? To this question, Puritan divines answered sanctification. Indeed, the issue of sanctification was the second noted in Winthrop's chronicling of the major issues involved in the Antinomian Controversy. It was also a major issue of discussion between Cotton and the elders of the Bay colony in the "Sixteen Questions." Cotton gave attention to this issue in his response to the thirteenth question, "whether evidencing justification by sanctification, be a building of my justification on my sanctification."⁴¹ In like manner, as a proof of the theological roots of the Antinomian Controversy, Thomas Shepard noted, the "principal opinion & seed" of all the "monstrous opinions" condemned by the Synod of 1637 was:

That a Christian should not take any evidence of gods special grace & loue toward him by the sight of any graces or conditional leuangelical promises to fayeth or sanctification; in way of ratiocination; (for this was evidence & so a way of workes,) but it must be without the sight of any grace faith holiness or speciall change in himselfe by immediate reulation in an absolute promise & because that the whole scriptures do giue such cleareplaine& notable evidence of favour to persons called & sanctified; hence they sayd that a second evidence might be taken from hence but no first evidence.⁴²

Two things can be deduced from the above as follows: 1. The problem that nearly destroyed and tore the city upon the hill apart was essentially theological as evidenced in the writings of the leaders of the colony at the time. It suggests in essence, that whatever political, economic or social factors that were later read into the controversy were secondary. The attempt to quell the problem involved the use of state apparatus and as such the primary issue involved is not political as will be seen later. 2. The problem of contention among the feuding camps has to do with the relationship between justification and sanctification.

It will be important at this juncture to provide a brief background to the problem. It was a common assumption among English Puritans that it was possible for one to know that he or she was saved. Thus the slogan in the 1630s among the Puritans: "Brother, are you saved?" As the situation continued there was growing anxiety among believers who wanted to be certain that they had been saved. As a response, the ministers went through lengthy sermons in which they explained the various processes of conversion to their members and this often came in the form of books. The problem then was that given the nature of the problem, it was impossible for the

⁴¹ John Cotton, "Sixteene Questions of Serious and Necessary Consequence," in *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638*, ed. David Hall, 52.

⁴² Thomas Shepard, *The Works of Thomas Shepard*, ed., John A. Albro (Boston, 1853), 78; on-line, www.Bartleby.com, accessed 17 July, 2016.

preachers to give a satisfactory answer to this raging question in the heart of the worshippers. Part of the solution was that the preachers had to come up with some “objective measure of grace – some outward sign of inner holiness.”⁴³ The answer provided by the preachers was the doctrine of sanctification. However, there is still a problem to resolve. How does one know truly since some people can pretend to be Christians by displaying external piety without necessarily being saved? To this question the preachers answered it was not possible for one to sustain such outward piety without first being transformed or regenerated.⁴⁴

When the Puritans came to the Bay Colony, they were still confronted with this problem of assurance of salvation. At the initial stage the vigorous preaching and the near insatiable longing of the colonists for grace brought about great revival amongst the colonists.⁴⁵ This enthusiasm for greater knowledge of grace led to a great revival among the colonists from about 1633. Roger Clap explained the situation this way:

God’s holy spirit in those days was pleased to accompany the word with such efficacy upon the hearts of many, that our hearts were taken off from Old England and set upon heaven. The discourse not only of the aged, but of the youth also, was not, how shall we go to England, but how shall we go to heaven? Have I true grace wrought in my heart? Have I Christ or no? O how did men and women, young and old, pray for grace, beg for Christ in those days. And it was not in vain. Many were converted, and others established in believing.⁴⁶

The Spirit of revival which Clap described above was confirmed by the situation in the First Church in Boston that gained not less than sixty-three converts in a matter of six months following the joining of the church by John Cotton. This number was said to be about half the members that had joined the church in the previous three years.⁴⁷ By 1635, however, there had

⁴³ David Hall, “The Antinomian Controversy,” in *Anne Hutchinson: Troubler of the Puritan Zion*, ed. J. Francis Bremmer, 22.

⁴⁴ David Hall, “The Antinomian Controversy,” in *Anne Hutchinson: Troubler of the Puritan Zion*, ed. J. Francis Bremmer, 22.

⁴⁵ David Hall, “The Antinomian Controversy,” in *Anne Hutchinson: Troubler of the Puritan Zion*, ed. J. Francis Bremmer, 22.

⁴⁶ Roger Clap, “How the Puritans suffered and Loved one Another,” in *Stedman and Hutchinsons, Comps: A Library of American Literature: An Anthology in Eleven Volumes. 1891. Vols. I-II: Colonial Literature, 1607-1764*; on-line: www.bartleby.com/400/prose/167.html, accessed 17 July 2016.

⁴⁷ Records of the First Church of Boston, Massachusetts Historical Society

set in a spiritual depression in the colony and this went on until 1636. The consequence of such spiritual depression, Hall noted, was a growing and sharp anticlerical spirit among the people of the Bay colony.⁴⁸ Why such a hostile attitude toward preachers? Since preachers in the Bay colony attempted to pin down physical sense of assurance of salvation for their congregants, the signs worked initially because there was hardship in the land and the people turned to God in desperation for help. Such spiritual fervor might have been responsible for the revival. However, as life became easier and hardship reduced, the people of the new colony turned to something else. Their love for God waned and the pursuit of the mundane things of this world set in. What is the relationship between the spiritual depression and assurance of one's election and how does it relate to the Antinomian Controversy? A brief explanation will be needed here.

John Cotton in his series of sermons preached in 1636 referred to the previous three years' story of revival in the land. One of his concerns was the decline in piety. The reason for this according to Cotton is that the people of New England had become too proud of New England's Reformation of manners. Such acts, that is, seeking to "walke in the wayes of God" as laid down by the various church covenants was a "walke" that any hypocrite could perform therefore, Cotton, declared that it was nothing short of "righteousness of one's owne."⁴⁹ The simple fact for Cotton is that reformation of behavior is not an assurance that God has bound Himself into an everlasting covenant with humanity. He called upon them to be contrite at heart and look up to Christ for help rather than seeking help in the reformation of personal behaviors.⁵⁰

Second, the warning of Cotton that the colonists should depart from reliance on personal righteousness surfaced in Anne Hutchinson's discussion with John Cotton and formed the basis for which she denounced the ministers of the Bay colony as teaching "covenant of works."⁵¹ Covenant of works, as used by Hutchinson referred to the covenant that God made with Adam at his time of innocence. Adam could ensure his salvation by perfectly obeying the law, but he failed which led to the fall of man. The consequence of the fall was that man could no longer please God by works which necessitated the new covenant from Abraham, but had its final fulfillment in the gospel and salvation under this new covenant could only be through the atoning work of Christ. Anne Hutchinson could not see any connection between the two covenants thus

⁴⁸ David Hall, "The Antinomian Controversy," 24-25.

⁴⁹ John Cotton, Sermon Delivered at Salem, June 1636; on-line: <http://opac.newbank.com/select/evans/1603>; accessed 17 July, 2016.

⁵⁰ John Cotton, Sermon Preached in Salem.

⁵¹ David Hall, "The Antinomian Controversy," 25.

she called the former covenant of works and the latter covenant of grace. Based on this assumption she called all the preachers in the Bay colony legal preachers – she was already set on the path of collusion with the ministers of the Bay colony.

Third, the difference between the two covenants mentioned above also informed Anne's understanding of the communion with the Holy Spirit. Following Cotton's teaching on Union of the Spirit, Anne argued that the work of the Holy Spirit is immediate and based on the immediate nature of the workings of the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer helped solve the problem of assurance, because the Spirit once infused continues to dwell in the person and has no need to doubt the fact of their election anymore.⁵²

Following the issues discussed above as it pertains to the immediacy of the infusion of the Holy Spirit in the life the believer, Anne Hutchinson observed that the turmoil of preparation as preached by the Bay colony elders, reformation of behaviors, constantly waiting in prayers and the continuous efforts to please God do not bring the desired assurance of salvation – they can only be pointers to covenant of works that will not lead the believer to heaven.⁵³

Furthermore, Anne Hutchinson believed that although the Bible is a guide source for believers, it does not provide a complete source for one to determine his or her assurance of salvation. The words of the Bible can be filled “with divine life, and God can communicate directly to one through them.”⁵⁴ God can reveal His word directly to one as the person is praying – perhaps a verse like, 1 Tim 1:15, “. . . Christ Jesus came to this world to save sinners of which I am chief” (NKJV). The passage can be taken as communicating directly to the person praying and it becomes the basis of one's assurance of salvation. For Hutchinson, that is the time of justification and it brings about an unspeakable joy and peace in the heart of the believer. Such a person becomes infused with a pious spirit and he or she goes about with joy and demonstration of charity among the people he or she lives.⁵⁵ Although it may be an initial sign of justification, yet it may not be completely clear, but God will continue to send further proofs until one gets convinced. The Bible at this point is no more a mere set of rules but a set of suggestions on how one can express his or her love for God. Such a person begins to live a holy life, which is an

⁵² David Hall, “The Antinomian Controversy,” 25.

⁵³ Mark C. Carnes and Michael P. Winship, *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson: Liberty, Law, and Intolerance in Puritan New England* (New York: Longman Publishers, 2005), 41.

⁵⁴ Mark C. Carnes and Michael P. Winship, *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson*, 41.

⁵⁵ Mark C. Carnes and Michael P. Winship, *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson*, 41.

indication of sanctification and a confirmation that such a person has been saved.⁵⁶

Can such a person who has been infused with love and the Spirit of God still sin? Hutchinson believes it is possible to sin, but every act of sin brings sorrow and sadness to the believer who quickly seeks for ways to please God by totally trusting in Christ for help and not by looking at his behavior. Emphasis on confirming one's justification based on external behaviors such acts may be deceptive and "akin to what the Catholic Church in Rome has done for centuries, and cannot abide."⁵⁷

By saying that one can receive direct revelation from God outside the Bible, Hutchinson challenged an important principle of the Puritan orthodoxy as it relates to how the Bible should be interpreted and how the Bible should be used by believers. The problem with Anne's assertion is that the Bible can be made to say anything a person wants it to say without due consideration to the circumstances surrounding the time, place, culture, grammar, and context in which the particular verse arose. This no doubt is the problem of fringe religions and heresy teachers. In the same vein, such an approach to the Bible indirectly rejects the authority of ministers. If it is possible for anyone to come up with any particular verse of the Bible and use it without paying attention to the sequence of its appearance may breed anarchy and serious confusion.

Second, Anne attacked the idea of sanctification as an evidence of justification. She noted that there was no need to depend on external manifestations as a proof of justification. Peter Bulkeley, however argued otherwise. For him, sanctification is a proper and justifiable way of knowing that one has been saved. Referring to the word of Jesus to His disciples Bulkeley noted, "But if there is no trial and knowledge of our estate to be had by sanctification, then what did Christ mean when he told his disciples, that hereby should all men know them to be his disciples if they love one another? Joh 13."⁵⁸

Considering the arguments above, it could be said that theological issues were at the root of the Antinomian Controversy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony between 1636-1638. The settlers were persuaded by religious motives having suffered oppression in England. However, they were at logger head on the true interpretation of certain doctrinal issues especially the doctrine of assurance of salvation for believers and the relationship between justification and sanctification. Both factions— the Bay Colony leaders and the Hutchinsonians subscribed to the Calvinist-

⁵⁶ Mark C. Carnes and Michael P. Winship, *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson*, 41.

⁵⁷ Mark C. Carnes and Michael P. Winship, *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson*, 41.

⁵⁸ Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel Covenant Opened*, 261-263.

Reformed orthodoxy, but could not arrive at a unified interpretation of their beliefs. Anne Hutchinson having acquired such popularity and being bold and circumspect confronted the situation head-long. The result was the trial and the ultimate banishment of Anne Hutchinson. But central to the controversy were theological issues.

The Trial of Anne Hutchinson and the political Implication of the Controversy

The arrival of Anne Hutchinson in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1634 and her meteoric rise and popularity soon attracted the attention of ministers in the colony. As her popularity swelled and she became more confrontational in her denouncement of the ministers in the colony, there was a growing concern among the ministers that something needed to be done about her situation. Anne was not tried immediately until certain measures were carefully explored. Cameron noted that in November 1637 a list of sixteen questions were presented to John Cotton and the questions were aimed at finding out if Cotton was teaching the gospel and a system that was in agreement with the teachings of the other ministers in the Bay colony.⁵⁹ Although Cotton continued to maintain his theological position, the situation in the colony continued to be in great tension. In addition, there was the threat of the Pequot Indians that the leaders of the colony decided to wipe out. The process of the attack on the Indians called for the raising of troops to which majority of the people of Boston refused to join ostensibly because of what they perceived to be the wrong treatment meted to Henry Vane, a staunch supporter of Cotton, Hutchinson and John Wheelwright. The reason given by the people of Boston, however was that they could not partake in such act with people with whom they do not agree on matters of doctrinal purity an act that has been interpreted as the first instance of the declaration of an individual's freedom to act in the colonies.⁶⁰

In the summer of 1637, owing to the growing troubles in the colony, because of the increasing attacks of Anne Hutchinson and her group on elders of the colony, the ministers deemed it necessary to call a synod of all the churches in the colony. At the Synod, the elders prepared a list of eighty-four errors. The purpose of the list of errors was to find a way of pressurizing Cotton to change his position. The list of the errors depicted most of the issues that have been in contention on the issue of sanctification and justification.⁶¹ The list of the eighty-four doctrinal errors deliberated upon at the Synod of churches was meant to achieve two things: First, it was an attempt to bring Cotton on the side of the rest of the ministers so that it would be easier for the ministers to address the errors of Hutchinson. 2. To provide a set of doctrines acceptable in the

⁵⁹ Cameron, *The Role of John Cotton*, 113.

⁶⁰ Helen Agur, *An American Jezebel: The Life of Anne Marbury Hutchinson* (New York: Brentano, 1930), 160.

colony that will enable them manage the theological crisis properly.⁶² As Gura noted the elders were able to achieve their objectives. Cotton had been swayed to work with the colony ministers and with the decisive handling of the case of John Wheelwright and his followers, Anne had been considerably weakened before she was arraigned for trial on sedition.⁶³

Anne Hutchinson was tried by the General Court in November 1637. At the end of the lengthy trial, she was found guilty of sedition and subsequently banished from the colony and was to be remanded in custody in Roxbury. In the following Spring, Anne was tried for the second time, this time by the First Church in Boston. She was convicted of holding and teaching erroneous doctrines and was therefore, excommunicated from the Church.⁶⁴

With the banishment and excommunication of Anne Hutchinson, the colony elders had quelled a major uprising in the colony and the colony can now enjoy a measure of peace. Not until about another two decades that the antinomian issue resurfaced again in the colony and not until the last decades of the 17th century did the colony experience such a tremendous crisis again with the problem of witchcraft. Why did the elders take such a drastic action against Anne Hutchinson? This is where some of the political implications of the crisis become clear.

Ronald Cohen and Jeffrey Kahl argued that political motivations were the major objectives of the leaders of the colony. Indeed, Charles Francis Adams noted that to say that the Antinomian Controversy was a theological issue was inconceivable.⁶⁵ For Cohen, by 1637, the colony was facing serious centrifugal crisis capable of aborting the overall objective of the colony leaders to establish a distinct community set up on the ideals of a godly establishment.⁶⁶ Jeffrey Kahl strongly disagreed with the notion held by William Stoeber that at the root of the Antinomian Crisis was a theological problem. He insisted that the major reason for the elders' reaction in

⁶¹ Frank Shuffleton, *Thomas Hooker, 1584-1647* (Princeton, NJ.: Princeton University Press, 1977), 250.

⁶² See Philip F. Gura, *A Glimpse of Zion's Glory, Puritanism and Radicalism in New England 1620-1660* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1984), 255-56.

⁶³ See Philip F. Gura, *A Glimpse of Zion's Glory*, 255-56.

⁶⁴ Emery Battis, *Saints and Sectaries*, 186-88.

⁶⁵ Ronald Cohen, "Church and State in Seventeenth Century Massachusetts: Another Look at the Antinomian Controversy," *Journal of Church and State*, 12.3 (1970), 476; Jeffrey Kahl, "The Antinomian Controversy and the Puritan Vision: A Historical Perspective on Christian Leadership," *Ashland Theological Journal* 33 (2003), 60-61; and Charles Francis Adams, *Three Episodes of Massachusetts History* (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Co., 1892), 368.

⁶⁶ Cohen, "Church and State," 476.

quelling the crisis was to protect and preserve their ideals of the city upon the hill.⁶⁷ For Cohen, the need to preserve the ideals for the establishment was the motivating factor for the action of the elders of the Bay Colony. He acknowledged that the nature of the crisis was theological, but the political motivation for the sustenance of the objective of the founding fathers was more primary in the heart of the colonists.⁶⁸ Jeffrey Kahl confirmed the same thought when he observed that although the crisis took a theological dimension it was indeed the need to sustain the vision of the leaders of the colony that was judged to be more important to the leaders. Although there is truth in the arguments of Cohen and Kahl noted above, the problem with their position is a wrong ordering of priority. It is certain that there would have been no need for the intervention of the State if the protagonists of the different theological views were able to manage their affairs properly at home. The political dimension of the controversy was contingent upon the theological crisis, thereby making political action an aftermath of the theological problem.

There is no doubt that the founding fathers of colony had the intention of setting up a nation based on the tenets of Christianity because of their experience of religious repression and corruption in England. In light of the problem of repression and corruption of the State Church, they felt the solution to the problem was the “errand to the wilderness” where they will enjoy an atmosphere of true freedom of worship, the Antinomian crisis surfaced as a threat to the achievement of this noble objective of the founding fathers and they had to devise a means of resolving the crisis. The means of resolving the problem involved the use of state apparatus (a political dimension). True as that may be, it could be seen that Winthrop one of the *dramatis personae* in the crisis was quick to note that the whole problem revolved around the doctrine of assurance of salvation and whether preparation was needed for Christian conversion—a theological problem.⁶⁹

Another aspect of the political dimension of the Antinomian Crisis is the personalities involved in the debate. In the first instance, Anne Hutchinson was a bold and charismatic person. Her boldness, charisma, intelligence, and wit endeared her to many in the colony including such personalities as Henry Vane, governor of the colony. Vane who became a puritan in 1628 while in Oxford came to New England in 1635.⁷⁰ He was a man of tremendous social and political

⁶⁷ Jeffrey Kahl, “The Antinomian Controversy,” 62.

⁶⁸ Cohen, “Church and State,” 476

⁶⁹ Winthrop, “A Short Story of the Rise, reign and ruine . . .,” 305.

⁷⁰ Carnes and Winship, *The Trial of Anne Hutchinson*, 26-29, Cameron, *The Role of John Cotton*, 97-98. Also see *The Winthrop Journal*, 1: 196

influence. He was said to be more at home with the teachings of John Cotton and that of Anne Hutchinson. Little wonder Cameron noted that Anne Hutchinson might not have been as popular as she was if she did not have the backing of such a strong personality like Vane.⁷¹

Because of the support that Anne Hutchinson enjoyed from Vane, Winthrop was unable to move against Hutchinson as long as Vane was governor. The need for political power to handle the crisis might have partly motivated Winthrop's campaign for the movement of the election from Boston to New Town, making it difficult for many Bostonians to vote. The point to be noted here is that Anne's support from such personalities as John Cotton, governor Vane and wide popularity she enjoyed among the members of the Boston church must have served as a big threat to the ministers in the Bay colony, which was why they felt they needed to move quickly against Anne before she destroyed them and tear the colony apart. This explains why Winthrop while entering the incident of Antinomian Controversy into his journal noted that Anne Hutchinson was making trouble over the issue of sanctification and union with Christ.⁷² It goes without saying from the above that political reasons played a prominent role in the Antinomian Controversy, the leaders of the Bay colony were interested in ensuring that they maintain their dream of a city upon the Hill and they believed that ecclesiastical authority and political control were inseparable. This is one of the issues involved in the debate between Roger Williams and John Cotton.⁷³ In spite of the desire of the Bay colony elders to preserve their vision of a model city, the move to silence the Antinomian Controversy started as a theological issue, argued and sustained throughout as a theological issue, but resolved with political apparatus.

CONCLUSION

Having examined the Antinomian controversy in New England within a broad theological context and the resultant political resolution of the crisis, it could be said that theological reasons were primary motivations of the controversy. The submission that the Antinomian controversy was primarily motivated by theological reasons can be traced to the origins and background of the major role players in the crisis —Anne Hutchinson and her followers, John Cotton, Henry Vane and John Wheelwright. On the other hand, people like Thomas Shepard, Winthrop, Peter Bulkeley were all people motivated by interpreting certain aspects of their Calvinistic reformed

⁷¹ Cameron, *The Role of John Cotton*, 99.

⁷² *Winthrop's Journal*, 1:195.

⁷³ Details of the debate can be found in John Cotton, *The Bloody Tenent Washed and made White in the blood of the Lambe* (London, 1647), 5. Cotton believed that magisterial control was essential for an effective running of the state. Roger Williams in his response raised objection to Cotton's assertion.

orthodoxy. It was the failure to find a middle ground interpretation of the doctrinal problem that threatened and nearly brought down the commonwealth.

One could be sympathetic to the views of such scholars like Ronald Cohen and Jeffrey Kahl that the overriding purpose for the elders of the colony was political and the fulfillment of their vision. The problem with the approach taken by Cohen is that they took a broad look at the whole problem vis-à-vis the religious and political philosophies of the elders of the colony, thereby failing to appreciate the specific circumstances leading to the Antinomian Controversy. Even then, it is obvious that the worldview of the elders of the colony was purely religious and therefore theological because religious factors are essentially theological issues, a fact which also flaws the submission that political factors were overriding reasons for the Antinomian controversy. To this end, it could be said that when examined critically and in line with the arguments presented above, at the heart of the Antinomian Controversy is the correct interpretation of the doctrine of free grace—assurance of salvation, justification as it relates to sanctification and union with Christ. All these are theological issues. The solution to the problem however, helped in giving a proper understanding of the foundations of democratic ethos in America—principles of separation of church and state and the declaration of individual freedom to act. These principles (separation of church and state and the freedom of the individual were later to form the tenets of the core values of the American Republican spirit.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 212-215, 287.

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