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English 110C/History 113R

7 October 2014

Justice in 17th Century Puritan Society

In 17th century Puritan society women were viewed differently than in other places. Women worked hard all day making clothing, churning butter, preserving food, and making candles to light the house. For all the hard work that women did in the household, they did not have to do it alone. In the Massachusetts Bay colonies many families came and lived close to each other. This allowed for more conversation among other women. For the first time, women had neighbors to sit and work, and share ideas. Women began to feel equal to men because they did comparable work. This sense of individuality was exemplified by a Puritan woman named Anne Hutchinson. Hutchinson, a mother of fifteen children, was one of the first to hold gatherings in her home and teach other women and men about the Bible. When word got out around the colony that Hutchinson had been holding these gatherings, the ministers became angered. They had no problem with Hutchinson teaching in the privacy of her own home. However when it began to be more public to the point that she was teaching men they insisted that it be stopped. When Anne Hutchinson was excommunicated and banned from the colony, it showed that was no justice for women in the 17th century.

One can look at Hutchinson’s trial in 1638 as an example of how justice was viewed in the 17th century. The Puritan Court asked tough questions to Hutchinson to test her perspective of the Bible. The Court wanted Anne Hutchinson to believe she was wrong in her actions and that the Court was right. Because she was a woman, the Court viewed her as inferior and treated her as such. The Court had many issues with what Hutchinson was doing. The issue that most concerned the court was that Anne Hutchinson was not only teaching and preaching to women but to men as well. It irked the court because in 17th century Puritan society men were considered the superior sex. The Court questioned her thinking when they said “if a man in distress of conscience or other temptation &c. should come and ask your counsell in private, might you not teach him?” (Skinner, 4) Hutchinson responded “It is said, I will poure my spirit upon your daughters, and they shall prophisie &c. If God give mee a gift of Prophecy, I may use it…” (Skinner, 4) Hutchinson is basically said that the gift of preaching had been given to her by God and that she had a responsibility to use it. The Court believed though that as a women she was not intellectually capable of understanding the Bible like men.

Another issue the court had with Anne Hutchinson was the fact that she preached in public. Congregating in the privacy of her own home was fine, but Anne Hutchinson proudly taught the Bible to others out in the open. The Court tried their best to use this against her by saying “There were private meetings indeed, arte still in many places, of some few neighbors, but not so publick and frequent as yours,...” (Skinner, 4). Hutchinson responded by saying that it was her duty as an elder to teach those younger than she about the Bible. Hutchinson viewed her preaching as a part of her life and something that she was called to do but because the Court did not agree and judged her harshly because of it.

When the Court said “yes, you are the woman of most note, and of best abilities, and if some other take upon them the like, it is by your teaching and example, but you shew not in all this, by what authority you take upon you to bee such a publick instructor” (Skinner,4). they showed that they understood that Hutchinson had a gift but still thought that she was stepping out of her role as a Puritan woman. Hutchinson then used her knowledge of Aquilla and Priscilla, a spirit filled couple in the Bible who were companions to the apostle Paul to explain how what she was doing was not wrong. Hutchinson said “ Here is my authority, Aquilla and Priscilla, tooke upon them to instruct Apollo, more perfectly yet he was a man of good parts, but they being better instructed might teach him.” Hutchinson gave the Court two clear examples of scripture in the Bible that clearly support her argument that she is right but still the Court disagreed saying “But neither of them will sute your practise.” meaning that because she is a women she is not fit to teach to men. Her “practise” was to be a housewife and be the keeper of the ome and not to be teaching men. Hutchinson fired back when she said “they must not take it as it comes from me, but as it comes from the Lord Jesus Christ, and If I tooke upon me a publick Ministry, I should breake a rule., but not in exercising a gift of Prophecy and I would see a rule to turne away them that come to see me” (Skinner,5) Hutchison explained that she received her messages directly from God and it does not matter whether she preach to men or women it is her responsibility to use her gift. This was the last straw for the court. They then decided to ban Hutchinson from the colony. This proves that there was no justice in 17th century Puritan society because Hutchinson clearly won the case. She provided vivid evidence through her interpretation of the Bible that what she was doing was not wrong and the Court disregarded it because she was a woman.

Hutchinson was an example of a strong woman in the 17th century. She was a leader with an extraordinary mind with extraordinary conviction. She expressed a sense of inner enlightenment something that the Puritans Court viewed as very threatening. Hutchinson woke the Puritans up to see the power a woman can have and it scared them. Hutchinson lost the case even when her arguments were much stronger than those of the court. This shows the injustice in 17th century Puritan Society. These men were not willing to overlook the fact that she was the opposite sex as them and that all of her points were valid in the fact that she had done no wrong. Although Hutchinson lost the case her experience during her trial provided an example of the view of justice towards women in the 17th century. Hutchinson questioned the validity of the Puritan Court because she exposed them as biased towards one interpretation of the bible. Hutchinson views were different and the Court punished her for it. One can only ask if there is always going to be a problem with the interpretation of the bible then what is the need for the Court in the first place? This question is discussed throughout the 17th century into the 18th century as more and more women begin to fight for justice in American society. Something that Anne Hutchinson spearheaded when she was the first to fight the court and question their views.