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Michael P. Winship: Making Heretics

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INTRODUCTION

"ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY" is the conventional but relatively modern term for the events this book chronicles. The label is a misleading nineteenth-century simplification that marks the fading of the complexities of seventeenth-century English radical religion in cultural memory.[1] The more the research and writing for this book progressed the less satisfactory it seemed. Historians routinely acknowledge that when hostile contemporaries used a general term to describe the radical religious doctrines being dispersed in Boston, they were far more likely to use "familist," referring to the heterodox group, the Family of Love, than "antinomian," meaning to be freed from God's moral law. They did so deliberately, and if one must use a partisan term, then the dispute should be called the familist controversy, which would have the merit of defamiliarizing it while providing a richer contextual framework. Or we could take the vantage point of the losing side, who viewed their opponents as heretically arguing that obedience to God's laws, not faith in Jesus, would save them, and call it the legalism controversy. I deemed the purposes of this book best served by a term that all parties in the conflict claimed for themselves. As Boston's minister John Cotton once preached, the dispute revolved around how to best magnify the free grace of God, and to call it the free grace controversy seems both descriptively accurate and prejudicial to none of the actors.

The free grace controversy, for the stature of the persons involved and its long-term results, was the greatest internal dispute of pre–Civil War puritanism, either in England or New England. The controversy shook the infant Massachusetts Bay colony from 1636 to 1638. Accusations of false doctrine flew back and forth, the government went into tumult, and by the time the crisis had subsided, leading colonists had voluntarily departed or had been banished. It left a permanent stamp on New England, and in terms of its impact in England, it was arguably the single most important event in seventeenth-century American colonial history.[2]

Such an important event has never lacked for scholarly interpretations, and historians have debated a number of perspectives in recent decades. Were Cotton and his admirer Anne Hutchinson defending the mystical heart of the Reformed Christian tradition from a creeping and earthbound humanism?[3] Were their ministerial opponents defending a profound understanding of the human condition from persons who flinched before its tough-minded realism?[4] Was the controversy a graphic display of the danger that a radical lay wing presented to puritanism, or was it

chiefly between Cotton and his opponents, who represented two equally valid schools of orthodoxy?[5] Did the dispute represent a revolt of proto–free market merchants against organic agrarians, or a panicked patriarchy clamping down on gender dissidence?[6]

These are very different perspectives, but they share a common element. They all presume the clash of structural opposites. Whatever the given opposites might be—radical/orthodox; conservative/innovative; free market/agrarian; patriarch/proto-feminist—the scholar lines them up and they collide. This heavy emphasis on the explanatory power of structural forces, however varying, gives an inevitability to the conflict and thus encourages the neglect of the narrative itself—if a collision was bound to take place, the details of the crash are of secondary importance.[7] The last book-length narrative on the controversy was published in 1962. While much has been written on its various aspects since then, this literature, for all its variety of approaches, tends to presuppose that the events themselves have already been adequately reconstructed. "The facts [of the controversy] can be recounted quite easily," says one recent account invoking the structural tensions of puritan patriarchy.[8] Even the authors who do pay attention to narrative do not utilize all the printed sources, although these are not extensive and important evidence lies scattered throughout them. The archives, with critical documents, are left undisturbed by virtually everyone.[9]

This historiographical state of affairs is analogous to scholarship on the nearly contemporaneous English Civil War before the revisionism of the 1970s. There, too, the emphasis was on interpretation and structural issues, mostly varieties of "rises of"—the bourgeois, the puritans, the gentry—with the facts of the event being taken for granted. But the revisionists stressed that it was the event itself that needed to be recreated before interpretations were superimposed. Recreation, they argued, required the careful search for and sifting of documents and, above all, a feeling for contingency and the importance of personal actions and short-term causes.[10] As with English revisionism, this project's ambition was to reconstruct the process of the controversy itself, utilizing as full a range of published and manuscript sources as could be located. The book envisions the controversy in the first instance not as fixed and structural, but as political, as personalities, personal agendas, and an ongoing process of judgment calls, stakings of positions, and shifting coalitions, a series of short-term events having short-term effects with cumulative results.

Underlying this conception of the free grace controversy as undetermined is an undetermined conception of puritanism. The term "puritanism" functioned as an almost free-floating insult in seventeenth-century England. It started as a term of abuse in the 1560s aimed at those

who found the ceremonies of the newly reestablished Protestant Church of England still excessively Roman Catholic. In England's ongoing religious unsettledness, its use expanded until it could be deployed against anyone whom someone else thought excessively Protestant and/or zealous and strict in his or her religion. "*Rascal people* will call any man that beareth but the face of honesty, a *Puritan*," as a minister complained in 1619. Recipients of the label bitterly resented it; John Cotton claimed that "the righteous hand of the Lord struck him with madnesse who invented the term."[11] Given those amorphous and polemical roots, "puritanism" resists being pinned down into a fixed scholarly label, despite a wide variety of attempts to do so. This book therefore uses "puritanism" roughly and imprecisely, and interchangeably with overtly imprecise terms like "godly" and "hot Protestant."[12] It covers various groups—ministers, magistrates and gentry, and more ordinary lay people—jockeying for respective advantages while seeking salvation and sharing to varying degrees different aspects of the general goal of creating a religiously and morally purified Reformed Christian commonwealth. They also shared overlapping groups of negative reference points—the ungodly, church ceremonies and hierarchy, and Rome, among others—that were perceived as obstacles both to salvation and to a properly reformed England. Neither the goal nor the negative reference points necessarily added up to a harmonious whole, and puritanism points to unstable and dynamic coalitions not only between individuals and between groups, but even within individuals themselves. It has recently been suggested, somewhat hyberbolically, that it is more useful to talk of "puritanisms" rather than "puritanism," for there were almost as many puritanisms as there were puritans.[13]

This irreducible pluralism was not a sought-after situation. A hundred years after the Reformation shattered Western Christendom, the unity of the saints remained a powerful ideal. As Massachusetts magistrate John Endicott put it, "God's people are all marked with one and the same mark . . . and where this is, there can be no discord."[14] In pursuit of that freedom from discord puritans proved among the most zealous heresy hunters in the Elizabethan and early Stuart Church of England. There was a powerful drive among them, as Patrick Collinson puts it, toward a "monolithic, disciplined Christian community."[15] That drive had a basis in reality; if there were no prevalent tendencies and widely shared assumptions in puritanism, there would be nothing we could call puritanism to describe. Yet it is important to be aware that such unity as existed in hot Protestantism was always provisional. There was an ongoing and unresolvable tension between the aspiration to unity and the constant generation of diversity.

Puritans, for example, like all Christians at the time, were confident that the Bible contained a single, saving truth. But extracting that truth was a

highly complex and contingent affair. The raw biblical motifs out of which puritans constructed religious knowledge—Adam's Fall, the Law, the Gospel, Christ's Atonement—were rich with a potential abundance of meanings. An interpretive elite of ministers, held together by similar educational backgrounds, similar theo-political goals, and often common kinship networks, attempted to contain that fecundity within what they considered normative channels and direct it to what they considered appropriate ends. Their task was fraught with potential difficulties as the knowledge was hardly timeless and self-evident, but social and provisional. The Bible, with its contradictory texts, was available for all to read, and godly clergy themselves could not always agree on what it meant. The laity's interpretation and evaluation of biblical truth took place across a wide variety of sites—discussion, debate, prayer, meditation, conferences, and reading—over which the clergy had less than absolute control.

On no topic was the social and provisional nature of godly knowledge more evident than the one over which the free grace controversy was fought, assurance of salvation. It was a subject of eternal life and death importance. The godly wanted to experience it; they wanted their brethren and sisters to confirm that they genuinely had it; and they wanted to regulate access to it. What legitimately constituted assurance and how it was legitimately obtained were issues that were thrashed out over a range of venues that stretched from public doctrinal and scriptural debates to the most intimate and private recesses of personal identity formation and experience. Ministers dictated guidelines and proposed scriptural boundaries, guided by a wide variety of concerns, while the laity and the ministers themselves through their own private and public devotional lives evaluated, reaffirmed, and challenged those guidelines and boundaries on this, the most precious of accomplishments.

The ministerial interpretive elite certainly set the dominant tone on debates over assurance and other issues of puritan piety. One does not have to step too far back from that elite to see it blend into a doctrinal and affective unified orthodoxy. But one does not have to step too close to it to see a broad range of unresolved problems, differing doctrinal emphases, various and potentially conflicting affects, and evolving debates and disagreements. It is important to be aware of just how extensive that diversity was.[16] For example, William K. B. Stoever's excellent study of the theology of the free grace controversy describes well most of the important formal differences between John Cotton and the rest of Massachusetts's ministers.[17] But by presenting Cotton's opponents as an ideological monolith, a "New England mind," which they were not, Stoever leaves unexplained the critical questions of how such a well-respected minister as Cotton could wander so far astray and why his fellows did not rise up en masse to condemn him. Cotton was not unique. From Anthony Wotton in the

1610s to Ezekiel Culverwell in the 1620s to Cotton in the 1630s to Richard Baxter in the 1640s, a succession of prominent godly ministers, "puritan" in their training, social networks, and theo-political aspirations, came up with idiosyncratic doctrinal formulations as they pursued a psychologically and socially effective Reformed theology.

Just how much theological variation puritans were prepared to tolerate was an open question. All of the above ministers had their fierce detractors, but they also had brethren who, for a variety of reasons, chose to consider their doctrinal deviations as either not serious or outweighed by other aspects of their godliness, and they also had admirers. Some godly ministers cultivated an "antinomian" style of divinity far removed from the mainstream and self-consciously set up the mainstream puritan divines as their opposition—"contra-puritans" T. D. Bozeman has called these divines.[18] Yet these ministers pitched themselves as in effect doing what their puritan opponents were supposed to do and failed to, and they played their more-puritan-than-the-puritans stance to a godly lay audience who might gad from radical antinomian ministers to their militant puritan foes and see no inconsistency in doing so. Even some very radical ministers passed as "godly" with at least some of their mainstream brethren. Puritans might and did aspire to unity, but developing a consensus that a particular minister or lay person's doctrinal peregrinations had crossed over into heresy and attempting to make that consensus stick was inevitably a political, heavily negotiated, and, in England, usually less than successful process.

The means by which puritans massaged conflict and maintained a rough consensus, the politics of puritanism, is not easily studied, but it is critical for understanding both the dynamism and the limitations of puritanism as a movement. Ministers were reticent up to the 1640s about frankly airing their differences in print while the laity did not publish, and by the 1640s efforts to maintain consensus had largely broken down in the confusion of the Civil War. Much of the raw historicity of English and American puritanism where ministerial and lay consensus maintenance took place is lost to us—the conferences, debates, meditations, manuscripts, conventicles, the vast majority of the sermons, and all the extempore prayer. The free grace controversy has left a relative abundance of unusual documents: sermons that can be tied to specific occasions; records of lay and ministerial conferences; position papers; extended clerical manuscript debates; and trial transcripts. Through these, we can construct a relatively detailed "moving picture" of the godly community engaging in the politics of self-definition in a moment of unusual stress, attempting to draw and enforce the parameters of genuine godliness and determine the acceptable amount of play between diversity and unity.

This book thus analyzes the free grace controversy as a heavily contingent series of events revolving around the maintenance and breakdown of consensus. The approach provides a significantly unfamiliar perspective for assessing the roles of various participants. Studies of the controversy uniformly revolve around John Cotton and/or his lay admirer Anne Hutchinson. These two were certainly the doctrinal anchors of ministerial and lay Boston departure from the puritan mainstream. Cotton, the most renowned minister in Massachusetts, adjusted doctrine to meet manifold challenges and preserve what he deemed a central core of saving truths and as a result ended up himself facing accusations of heresy. Hutchinson, fluent in the language and practices of godliness, successfully for a time traded her spiritual accomplishments and Cotton's approval of her for considerable status and power in the semi-public sphere of puritan lay piety. But she eventually employed standard puritan tropes about the corruption of the ministry and the influence of Antichrist deeply and divisively within the ranks of the godly themselves, and her own spiritual life, personal ambitions, and circle of acquaintances encouraged her to graft on to Cotton's teaching elements from sources most puritans considered heretical.

If conflict was not only structural, however, but a consequence of contingencies and personalities, then Hutchinson, Cotton, and doctrinal differences in themselves are not necessarily enough to account for its appearance. Cotton, a famous and accommodating preacher, whatever his peculiarities, seems to have initially gotten along with his brethren in Massachusetts. Neither he nor they chose to make a point of their differences. To enmesh Cotton in controversy, he needed to be positioned in ways that made it seem important to others to engage in the considerable disruption that confronting him entailed. There is no question that Hutchinson was critical in the free grace controversy—the historians who focus on Cotton can make her little more than an appendage in his struggles, which scarcely reflects the role she played. Nevertheless, the earliest chroniclers of the controversy writing from the late 1630s to the 1650s had political reasons to magnify her importance. They wished to draw attention away from the parts played by leading and still important men. Most interpretations since have been guided by their emphases.

There was one man in particular, besides Cotton, from whom the early chroniclers were anxious to deflect attention—Henry Vane. Vane was perhaps the most important and influential person to come to Massachusetts in the 1630s. Son of one of King Charles I's privy counselors, he arrived in Massachusetts at the end of 1635, was elected governor in May 1636, and after a controversial year in office, returned to England in August 1637. He subsequently pursued important careers first in Charles's government and then in the revolutionary governments that succeeded it.

Vane was always well positioned to harm or benefit Massachusetts, and the first chroniclers had good reason to bury his role.

Although Vane is almost entirely neglected by scholars, he may have been the single most important reason why the controversy reached the pitch that it did. Vane was deeply taken with the radical possibilities in Cotton's theology. He encouraged Hutchinson to set up her own conventicles, and it is possible he encouraged her to begin actively engaging in her own theological speculation. Soon a small number of persons, mostly from Boston, with Hutchinson in the forefront, were melding together doctrinal elements from Cotton's divinity and the English antinomian/familist underground, with Vane's encouragement and participation. Many scholars assume that a dominant group of "antinomians" or "Hutchinsonians" emerged within the Boston congregation, which explains why others reacted so strongly against that church. There is no evidence for such a group; the Boston congregation is instead an invaluable study of the variety of threads that could tie a group of hot Protestants together in the absence of doctrinal uniformity. Through Governor Vane's patronage, however, heterodoxy centered in the Boston congregation obtained a potentially destabilizing visibility in the colony as a whole.

In other words, what energized the free grace controversy was not simply suspect doctrine, but that doctrine's visibility and claims to authority, which raises a number of critical new questions. How visible did heterodoxy have to become before the complicated process of trying to repress it was set in motion, and how heterodox did it have to be in the first place to warrant the disruption that repression inevitably brought about? What means of repression were appropriate, and how and when should they be employed, and to whom? While the opposition to Boston is usually presented as a monolith, clearly there could not be one set answer to any of these questions. Translating widely different perceptions into collective action was inevitably a negotiated, contentious, and political process.

There is a natural tendency among scholars of the free grace controversy to focus on overtly "radical" Boston elements in driving this process. But if puritanism was a set of negotiations, if its stability depended as much on the avoidance or massaging down of conflict as it did on agreement, and if radicalism consisted of the disruption of this stability from any direction, then the adjective "radical" can be bestowed more widely than it usually is. There were individuals who, in their zeal to police and pull in the bounds of orthodoxy, could just as radically disrupt the stability of puritanism as the occasional heterodox experimentalist.

One such individual was the minister Thomas Shepard. Shepard has long been recognized as one of the leading opponents of Boston; he was the only minister honored for his services during the conflict by the Massachusetts General Court. His role in the conflict, however, has generally

been considered reactive and straightforward rather than proactive and problematic. He was not simply the mouthpiece of the Massachusetts establishment defending orthodoxy from its besiegers. Shepard was an activist, an angry militant on the lookout for deviancy, a ministerial type especially prone to perceive serious conflict and dangerous heresy where others might not and act so as to realize that perception. He has also left an extraordinarily rich documentary base. Along with a few letters and other documents, sermons of his, some printed and some still in manuscript, exist for virtually the entire span of the controversy, a unique survival. This base allows a close study of the ways in which Shepard, and presumably those of his allies who left no archival traces, propagated and perpetuated a crisis. Not the least reason for Shepard's exemplary importance in understanding the fissiparous dynamic of puritanism is the demonstrable role he played in turning a gifted, independent, spiritual searcher like Hutchinson into a full-blown, all-bridges-burned-behind-her radical.

The clash between destabilizing radical heterodoxy and destabilizing radical orthodoxy was likely to be particularly severe in Massachusetts because the particular circumstances of the colony encouraged both. Released from the shackles of an increasingly hostile English state and church hierarchy, the godly could attempt to purify in ways unimaginable in England—one might deface the English flag to remove it of its dregs of superstition, demand the complete shunning of English brethren whose purity had not kept up with one's own, purify the church to such an extent that one began to develop millenarian fantasies about what had been accomplished, and set off on one's theological wanderings in anticipation of the imminent descent of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, unconventional elements of hot Protestantism that might have escaped official notice in the complex and erratically policed social environment of England played themselves out under the noses of a puritan ministerial and magisterial elite who now had the organs of state power in their control. One could monitor the laity and attempt to prescribe and enforce orthodoxy in ways that had not been possible in England.

This newly empowered drive to conformity was fueled not only by the internal tensions of puritanism but also by the fraught transatlantic framework within which the emigrants functioned. The geopolitical context of these devout Reformed Christians was a supernaturally driven one of an increasingly imperiled Reformation in the Last Days of the world, with God wrathfully ravaging Protestant Germany while Antichrist laid a sinister plot against England of "Spanish monarchy and Roman tyranny." That context encouraged the participants to frame the emergent controversy in Massachusetts in ways that further stoked its flames. On a more mundane level, even before the free grace controversy gathered momentum, English puritan leaders suspected that their New England brethren were too radi-

cal, and the English government initiated proceedings to revoke the colony's charter. The free grace controversy and the shifting fortunes of the precarious Massachusetts charter are conventionally treated as separate stories, with the former getting vastly more attention than the latter, but they are inseparably intertwined.

The free grace controversy arose as Boston radicalism in 1636 grew increasingly visible and some of the orthodox grew increasingly militant, anxious, and well armed with the tools of monitoring and repression. Two years of escalating party building and struggle ensued. The struggle climaxed not with Anne Hutchinson's trial in November 1637, although this trial gets the lion's share of scholarly attention, but with the shock waves that followed the trial of her brother-in-law, the bellicose minister John Wheelwright, on heresy and sedition charges the previous March. Wheelwright's was a hard-fought and closely contested trial, and it created bitter resentment in Vane and Cotton and most of Cotton's congregation. Vane and his followers challenged the legitimacy of the decision and even the legitimacy of Massachusetts's government. After Vane was defeated in the election for governor in May 1637, his supporters started talking of checking the power of the local government with the power of the king, while Boston's opponents spun fantasies about a massive satanic plot led by Vane to destroy the deeply insecure liberties and churches of New England. At the same time, Cotton and a large part of his congregation began making serious plans to emigrate. When that plan collapsed, Vane himself departed to England, promising his party that he would return, in all likelihood as a royal governor-general, an event that would have brought a very different ending to the stories of the controversy and the charter—fears and hopes about Vane and his return were very much alive for at least a few more years.

But Charles I was by now preoccupied with the war with the Scots that was to lead to his downfall, and Vane did not return. Cotton made his peace with the Massachusetts establishment. The Massachusetts authorities, taking advantage of Vane's absence, sentenced a few intransigent dissidents, including Hutchinson and Wheelwright, to banishment in November 1637. Some dissidents were cowed into acquiescence, while others were reconciled to the Massachusetts authorities by the increasingly radical stances of their brethren. Hutchinson's opinions grew more extreme and open, extreme and open enough that the Boston church examined her in March 1638 and excommunicated her, immediately prior to her departure from the colony. Although this outcome is conventionally presented as a victory for Shepard, he himself was dissatisfied with it. His coalition's policing action stopped far short of the ideological purging and purifying that he desired, and he continued to agitate conflict at least up to 1641.

The free grace controversy finally wound down just as the ultimate crisis of puritanism erupted, the English Civil War. The leading revisionist English historian, Conrad Russell, has provided his own explanation for that war—a ramshackle monarchical system broke down under the strain of crises in Scotland and Ireland, and issues that had been successfully massaged or sidestepped before rose up to overwhelm it.[19] Puritanism itself was a ramshackle entity, an uneasy set of alliances and pietistic impulses generated by the fraught and unstable relationship of Reformed Protestantism to the Crown and Church of England, and nothing illustrates its ramshackle nature better than the free grace controversy. The strains induced by puritanism's finding itself in power in England in the 1640s doomed the management of now exacerbated tensions between diversity and unity to failure. The free grace controversy is usually portrayed merely as symptomatic of issues in English puritanism. But just as it transpired in a context of transatlantic politics and concerns, its results were transatlantic in scope. In England it played a not inconsiderable part in the 1640s and 1650s in magnifying puritanism's systemic capacity for disorder.

In Massachusetts itself, old instincts of cohesion through compromise and tacit restraint reasserted themselves belatedly in spite of the efforts of ideologues like Shepard, and after much water over the dam. Those instincts, along with even more important good luck and favorable circumstances, enabled New England's godly establishment to weather the free grace controversy. It was a great crisis and a formative episode in the transatlantic transition from a never securely positioned and never well-defined movement to purify England's church and society to relatively stable and relatively coherent colonial American Reformed Christian polities.

Close narrative may be the best way to get at puritanism as a process, but it has its own limitations. Narratives are tentative and reflect the presuppositions and interests of their authors, and the present one is no exception. A narrative of the free grace controversy also faces the unavoidable problem that a very few documents have to do a great deal of explanatory work. One leaps from less than transparent source to less than transparent source, guided by one's accumulating assumptions, and tries not to look down at the dizzying gulfs of archival blankness beneath. This is far from an ideal situation, but there is no dodging it; analysis of an event cannot be separated from trying to determine, however tentatively, what it was that happened that one is trying to analyze. I have recreated what seems to me a plausible story consistent with such surviving documents as I was able to locate and judged relevant. Inasmuch as some elements of the narrative and interpretation are inevitably more speculative and inferential than others, it has been my intention to describe in the text and notes the process of narrative recreation thoroughly enough that readers may decide

without difficulty where the word "creation" would be a more appropriate term. The present narrative does not aspire to be interpretively exhaustive. It is intended to make a case that there are vital issues, personalities, and outcomes that have been unduly neglected in previous interpretations of the free grace controversy and to say something useful about how puritanism worked and failed to work.