

The Bondage of Liberty

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In 1645, John Winthrop was the governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony. Winthrop had been accused of interfering with the election of a local militia captain, along with several other local magistrates. The magistrates had ordered the arrest and imprisonment of colony members. This led to charges of corruption and tyranny, and Winthrop was forced to defend himself in court (Bremer 361). Winthrop was eventually acquitted. The 1645 address, known as the “Little Speech,” is where Winthrop asks colony members to respect authority, and to serve it faithfully. He says that citizens must submit to their rulers just as Christians serve Christ, and as a wife serves her husband. By comparing the role of a citizen and the role of a wife, Winthrop positions citizenship as an act of obedience. He says that people must submit to those who hold a God-given position of authority. As such, citizens must obey their leaders without complaint. In doing so, their liberties are preserved, and they are protected by the shelter of authority like women were protected by their husbands.

Winthrop’s speech reflects his strict religious values. Winthrop believed in the ultimate authority of Christ. He also believed in individual piety and strict devotion to the faith. Winthrop was a Legalist. This means that he believed that only discipline and strict adherence to moral codes of behavior would ensure salvation. Winthrop came into conflict several times with church members who found such rigidity was in opposition to the message of God’s grace and Christ’s message of redemption. Events such as the 1637 trial of John Wheelwright and Anne Hutchinson put Winthrop at odds with members of the faith who believed that salvation did not necessitate adherence to God’s laws (Reid 117). Legalists like John Winthrop believed that man’s nature was fundamentally corrupt, and that man required strict governance and moral guidance to find redemption. So Winthrop believed that rigid behavioral codes were necessary for salvation.

In this belief structure, God fills the role of a strict parent who limits a child's behavior in order to provide protection and shelter. For Winthrop, that parent-like role of authority was echoed in the relationship between the state and the citizen. The state, which was represented by officials like Winthrop, had to restrict the behavior of citizens in order to save them from themselves. John Winthrop believed that man was fundamentally ungovernable if left to his own devices. So state or federal authority was a moral necessity. In fact, the authority of the state was necessary for any liberty at all. Freedom, Winthrop believed, could only exist in the context of submission to authority. By framing liberty as a moral condition granted by the state, Winthrop draws a connection between liberty given to a citizen by the state, and the liberty given to married women by her husband's authority.

At the time female residents of the Massachusetts Bay Colony were viewed as the legal property of their husbands or male guardians. Without the protection afforded by this system women were defenseless. They had no legal identity, and their status as wife and/or mother was the only role they could fill without incurring the wrath of church elders. It was only within the context of marriage and family that women could exercise any degree of citizenship or agency. In law as well as practice, those who lived under authority (the husband's, or the state's) found freedom only in submission and obedience. Winthrop's analogy cements his position that submission to a higher authority was the only thing that could allow the subjugated access to freedom or individual liberty.

The analogy Winthrop draws between a women's role and a citizen's role continues when he argues that people should submit to authority even when they are being abused. Winthrop says that, "...whether her lord smiles upon her, and embraceth her in his arms, or whether he frowns, or rebukes, or smites her, she apprehends the sweetness of his love in all, and

is refreshed, supported, and instructed by every such dispensation of his authority over her” (32). This makes sense from Winthrop’s view of God’s relationship with man and the state’s relationship to citizens. If God (or the state) is vengeful, or if He smites His people or punishes them, Winthrop believed the people should act like an obedient wife and put up with the punishment because it is done out of moral necessity. To save people from themselves, like a husband saves his wife by virtue of their marriage. Winthrop is saying that the relationship itself, and not the day-to-day conflicts, is what provides salvation.

Of course, this is a difficult argument to make when women in Puritan society had so few rights. Women could not vote, or own land, or bear witness in a court of law. They also had very limited roles within the Puritan church, and could not serve as ministers. They were seen as secondary to their husbands, sons, brothers and other male relatives. Despite their low status, men like Winthrop believed that women still had some choice because “the woman’s own choice makes such a man her husband; yet being so chosen, he is her lord, and she is subject to him” (31). Just like Christians choose Christ as their Lord and Savior, women choose their husbands.

It is this choice that binds people to the person/idea that has authority over them. Winthrop extends this to the relationship between the citizen and the state. Like Christians choose Christ and women choose their husbands, citizens choose their magistrates. He writes, “It is yourselves who have called us [magistrates] to this office, and being called by you, we have our authority from God” (30). Winthrop sees commitment to a person/state/God as a way to both surrender and establish liberty. By recognizing a higher authority a person offers their submission, and in turn receives protection or salvation. However, he specifies that this covenant cannot be made unless the wife/citizen/Christian “quietly and cheerfully” submits, meaning that if the subjugated complain about their lot, it voids the covenant with the husband/state/God.

Works Cited

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