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navigating orthodoxy

The Calvinist Self in Lucy Hutchinson's On the Principles of the Christian Religion

Jeremy Loutensock

In 1668, the English translator, poet, and biographer Lucy Hutchinson, composed a letter to her daughter containing what she refers to as a “little summary” of “sound truths” (1). This work, now published with the title, *On the Principles of the Christian Religion*, functions as a “last exhortation” (2), wherein Hutchinson carefully defines and urges her daughter to adopt what modern scholarship knows to be orthodox Calvinism. However, Hutchinson’s *Principles* is far from being a mere reiteration of common religious thought. Rather, as Elizabeth Clarke notes, *Principles* “starts as an orthodox summary . . . [but] becomes a very interesting and original piece of theological thinking” (78). David Norbrook concurs with this view of *Principles*, noting that although Hutchinson does not stray far from the tenets of Calvinism, she demonstrates an acute awareness of and ability to address the potential pitfalls within contemporary theology (146). Such an awareness is evident within Hutchinson’s perception of the Calvinist self, as defined by the doctrines of human depravity, predestination, and irrevocable grace. As Norbrook observes, Hutchinson seems to be aware that the implications of these beliefs could trap some believers in a “despairing impotency” (155), wherein they “doubt their election and conclude that diligence and religious observances would be futile” (146). Interestingly, however, no scholarship has thoroughly explored the precise manner in

which Hutchinson addresses this point of sensitivity within *Principles*. The current examination, therefore, will demonstrate that by selectively emphasizing specific *principles* within the framework of orthodox Calvinism, Hutchinson successfully navigates the potential pitfalls of Calvinistic belief and thereby produces a hopeful view of the self. In turn, by adopting this hopeful view of the self, Hutchinson ultimately transcends her own alleged mortal and gender deficiencies to assume a priestly religious authority.

In constructing an optimistic view of the self, one might expect Hutchinson to stray from the core tenets of orthodox Calvinism and their often demoralizing implications; this, however, is far from being the case. As a whole, the doctrines that Hutchinson upholds deviate little, if at all, from the tenets of orthodox Calvinism, including human depravity, predestination, and arbitrary bestowal of grace. The degree of Hutchinson's adherence to his belief system can be seen in the striking resemblance between Hutchinson's own "little summary" (1) and other Calvinist documents, such as The Judgement of the Synode Holden at Dort, a credal statement that was jointly conceived by a gathering of Calvinist divines. For instance, within *Principles*, Hutchinson refers to mankind as "the children of darkness and slaves of Satan" who "can neither resolve nor execute any good work of [themselves]" (35). Similarly, *The Synode* asserts, "All men are conceived in sin [and] born the children of wrath, untoward to all good tending to salvation, . . . slaves of [sin], and neither will, nor can . . . set straight their own crooked nature" (32). It is not coincidental that both *Principles* and *The Synode* characterize mankind as "slaves." In each of these documents, human beings are portrayed as disempowered entities who are incapable of correcting their natural disposition toward unrighteousness. Thus, if *The Synode* is considered to be a reliable measure of Calvinist theology, then Hutchinson's view of unaided humanity closely aligns with the Calvinist tenet of human depravity.

In like manner, *Principles* and *The Synode* demonstrate a uniform view of predestination and the bestowal of grace. These views are evidenced in Hutchinson's assertion that "by the decree of God some men and angels are from eternity predestinated to everlasting life, and others [are foreordained] to everlasting death" (20). Clarifying the means whereby the elect gain everlasting life, Hutchinson then asserts, "all who are elected in Christ . . . are effectually called unto faith in Christ by his Spirit, working in due season, are justified, adopted, sanctified, and kept by his power" (21). Similarly, *The Synode* claims that "in process of time, God bestoweth faith on some and not on others, this

[proceeding] from his eternal decree.” (3). The stress that each of these works places on the arbitrary decrees of God when describing the fate of human souls unmistakably reflects Calvinistic predestination. Likewise, by attributing the faith and consequent redemption of the elect to the enabling intervention of deity, both *Principles* and *The Synode* demonstrate a Calvinist view of salvation and the bestowal of grace. Thus, the striking similarity between Hutchinson’s theology and a creedal document, such as *The Synode*, demonstrates that Hutchinson’s “final exhortation” is firmly grounded in the overarching theological context of mainstream Calvinism. As a result, the construction of the self-found in *Principles* is not an unconventional notion but a carefully constructed view of the elect, Calvinist self.

Despite Hutchinson’s close adherence to orthodoxy, however, her view of the self-consciously avoids the demoralizing implications of Calvinist theology and seeks instead to construct a more optimistic concept of the self. Norbrook points out that the doctrine of predestination caused many in Hutchinson’s time to despairingly assume that they were reprobates, or those who are predestined to damnation. However, although Hutchinson acknowledges that part of mankind is doomed to “dishonor and wrath” (21), she rejects the notion that God should be viewed solely as an “offended judge” (39) and maintains that those who “despair of [their salvation]” as a result of this belief are in error (23). Instead, Hutchinson advocates for a view of the self that hopes for election and carefully watches for the “means” or evidences of divine favor (23), ultimately declaring that “no man ought to determine of himself, or any other, that he is a reprobate” (20).

Hutchinson’s construction of an optimistic view of the human self begins with her characterization of mankind’s relationship with sin. Calvinist theology maintains that the reprobate are left to “their own ways” (*The Synode* 9), or in other words, they remain in a state of sin and are incapable of performing good works or preaching the word of God. In spite of this belief, however, Hutchinson strongly emphasizes that recognizing the presence of sin in one’s life should not drive that individual to assume that he or she is reprobate. Rather, she stresses that being painfully brought to acknowledge one’s moral fallibility could, in fact, be the first step to realizing one’s election. Describing this process, Hutchinson states that the redemptive process begins with the elect “being awakened with the terrors of the law, and [finding themselves] . . . under the bondage of [sin]” (62). By emphasizing that such “convictions” for sin are the first steps or “preliminary

work” to redemption (63), Hutchinson effectively blurs the indicative signs of one’s status as either elect or reprobate and thereby displays the difficulty of ascertaining one’s standing before God. Stating this more explicitly, Hutchinson declares, “The reprobates, as well as the elect, have convictions and humiliations for [sin], which are not easily distinguishable from each other” (66). Thus, by conflating the experiences of both the elect and the reprobate with sin, Hutchinson incorporates a sort of uncertain hopefulness into her view of the Calvinist self. After all, Hutchinson states that such convictions are an integral part of redemption and God’s enablement of the elect to love and become devoted to him. This is made abundantly clear in an analogy, wherein Hutchinson observes, “he that is [asleep] complains not of the darkness, but he that wakes in the dungeon greets the light with more exceeding joy” (64). Thus, by emphasizing that both the elect and reprobate experience conviction for sin, Hutchinson enables a view of the self that resists the despair associated with assumed reprobation and preserves the possibility of one’s election.

In a similar fashion, Hutchinson’s treatment of regeneration, the process by which God relieves the elect of convictions and enables them to perform good works, also fosters an optimistic view of the self. Orthodox Calvinism maintains that God, through the Holy Spirit, overcomes human depravity within the elect and moves these individuals to assume godly states of mind that then lead to obedience and good works (The Synode 38). In *Principles*, Hutchinson supports her optimistic view of the Calvinist self by emphasizing the individualized intensity, timing, and pace of this process. Speaking of this, Hutchinson submits,

The manner of the [work] of regeneration, though the [work] be the same, is different [almost] in every child that is [born] of God; as in the [natural] birth some have longer, some more [painful] pangs, some more desperate hazards and faintings, so according to the [several natural] constitutions, and other circumstances of various persons, and the force of the Spirit wounding the [soul] more deeply or more indulgently, some immediately close to Christ, some lie many days, months, and years under [cruel] agonies of [spirit] and are brought almost to the gates of hell before Christ snatch[es] them out of the power of death. (66-67)

As this passage demonstrates, Hutchinson adamantly teaches that regeneration is an individualized and unique experience for each elect person. According to her, all elect individuals experience some preliminary form of

convictions. However, the “hazards” and “agonies” experienced by some are of a much greater intensity. Likewise, this painful state endures longer for some individuals than others before regeneration begins. Finally, while regeneration is a quick process for some, bringing them “immediately close to Christ,” others experience a more gradual alleviation and may feel that they are “brought almost to the gates of hell.” Like Hutchinson’s discourse on convictions, this characterization of regeneration encompasses a wide breadth of human experience with deity and maintains the possibility of election in circumstances where evidence of such may not be prevalent or signs to the contrary may seem to exist.

By thus emphasizing the presence of convictions and the nature of regeneration within the process of redemption, Hutchinson ultimately constructs a view of the Calvinist self that is founded upon an uncertain but very much plausible hope for redemption. Her religious thought, encapsulated within orthodox Calvinism, creates a scenario for humanity in which sin and guilt are not indicative of reprobation and may even be the first evidences of election. Combined with Hutchinson’s unwavering certainty that “all who are elected in Christ . . . are redeemed by Christ” (21), this view of the self-advocates for optimistic vigilance, wherein individuals carefully and hopefully watch for God’s “means” (23) or evidences of election. In turn and through process of time, Hutchinson maintains that these unknowingly elect individuals will eventually experience a gradual “mortification of [sin]” (78) and someday overcome temptation all together. As she states, “though [the] remaining corruption sometimes [prevail], through the [continual supply] of grace from Christ by his [Spirit, sin] shall in the end be totally vanquished, . . . and the regenerate part shall overcome” (79).

Not surprisingly, Hutchinson’s orthodox but optimistic conceptualization of the self is not only a universal concept but one that she also subtly applies to herself individually. Indeed, as Norbrook observes, “[Hutchinson’s] writings give no signs of anguished debate about her own salvation” (147). This is especially clear in *Principles*, wherein Hutchinson acknowledges her own fallibility as both a deprived human being and as a woman but consistently portrays herself as an elect person who is in the midst of regeneration. Beginning in the opening lines of her doctrinal dissertation, Hutchinson confesses the reality of her own “infirmities and imperfections” (1) and later recognizes that at times these cause her to “weakly” and “confusedly” relate the word of God (89). In conceding these weaknesses, Hutchinson explicitly

concedes that the most fundamental symptoms of human depravity—an inability to fully engage with and relate to artifacts of righteousness—are present within her life. By doing so, Hutchinson actively accepts depravity as a basic component of her self-conception.

In like manner, Hutchinson also accepts the alleged weakness and susceptibility that contemporary theology assigned to women. This can be seen clearly in Hutchinson's choice of genre. Modern scholars agree that Hutchinson seems to have deliberately written *Principles* as a "mother's legacy." Based on the work of Jennifer Heller, this certainly seems to be the case. Heller observes that mothers' legacies function on the basis of maternal authority and are therefore almost always directed toward a "tender reader," usually including the writer's own child or children (43). Additionally, the mother's legacy often acknowledges the writer's deficiencies and relies on the author's love for her intended recipient to generate credibility, rather than asserting an academic pedigree (40). Clearly, *Principles* conforms to these generic parameters. Like other works within this genre, *Principles* exclusively and privately addresses Hutchinson's daughter. More specifically, Hutchinson fears that her daughter, for whom she has received "good hopes" of election (8), will fall into error by joining an unidentified sect (3-4). Thus, *Principles* resembles a group of mothers' legacies that specifically address wayward children. Likewise, as has been demonstrated, Hutchinson confesses her own weaknesses, relying on her daughter's "duty to [hear] and receive [her mother's] instruction" (90). Therefore, as Clarke purports, the generic structure of *Principles* demonstrates Hutchinson's awareness that she is writing within a designated, female literary space (81) and consequently reflects the contemporary belief regarding women's lesser ability to discourse on religious topics. Hutchinson's explicit acknowledgement of women's "ignorance and [weakness] of judgment" (5) further evidences the submission of her own self-conception to the doctrines of contemporary theology and her complete reliance upon deity to overcome weaknesses.

Despite the implications of contemporary religious belief for her self-conception, however, Hutchinson's emphasis on the process of redemption ultimately allows her to transcend the alleged weaknesses of her mortality and gender. This is plainly demonstrated in the introductory letter within *Principles*. Therein, Hutchinson claims, "Through mercy I find [myself daily] more [fixed] and [established than] I have sometimes [been], when the miscarriages of many that [professed] the truth, were a great

stumbling block to me" (6). Clearly, although Hutchinson accepts that she has at times fallen into doctrinal error, the intervention of deity has enabled her to become "fixed" in what she believes to be correct principles. The resemblance of this passage with Hutchinson's description of her daughter's situation makes this passage especially significant. Hutchinson is explicit in warning her daughter that joining a sect often leads believers to "espouse all the [erroneous practices] and opinions" of that particular group (4). By then touching on the susceptibility of women to "[entertain] fancies, and [be] pertinacious in them" (6), Hutchinson directly links female weakness to theological error. Consequently, when Hutchinson claims to have overcome the "miscarriages of [those] that [professed] the truth" (6), she seems to indicate that grace has allowed her to overcome a significant fallibility that is associated with her gender, as well as her more general human depravity.

The manner in which Hutchinson deviates from the generic conventions of the mother's legacy also reveals her divinely enabled status. Unlike most female writers of her time, Hutchinson's discourse in *Principles* is grounded firmly within scripture and the work of contemporary theologians. Likewise, Hutchinson's focus on arriving at a correct understanding of doctrinal principles differs greatly from the practical advice on modest dress and spousal duties that characterizes the writings of most other contemporary women (Norbrook 142). Finally, Hutchinson's source of authority also departs from the norm of the mother's legacy. Based on the amount of confidence that she places in her interpretation of correct theology within *Principles*, Hutchinson seems to indicate that her authority on this subject is more priestly than maternal. Whereas most legacy writers rely exclusively on maternal affection as a source of authority, Hutchinson also claims to have received the "characters" contained within *Principles* directly from God (91) and thereby possess a divinely appointed duty to relate these to her elect daughter (90). This model of authority creates the impression that Hutchinson is functioning as a divine messenger who represents God to his people. Consequently, although some of Hutchinson's rhetoric is similar to other mothers' legacies, her subject matter and claim to divine authority differentiates *Principles* from the works of other contemporary women. Thus, by stressing the ability of deity to enable the elect, Hutchinson seems to suggest that she, herself, has been empowered to overcome the fallibilities of both her fallen, mortal state and gender.

Ultimately, despite Hutchinson's description of *Principles* as a "little summary" (1) of preexisting religious thought, this work represents an educated and skillful ability to navigate Calvinist theology. By selectively emphasizing specific Calvinist beliefs, Hutchinson combats the believer's inclination to despairingly assume that he or she is predestined to damnation and instead constructs a scenario in which individuals are to patiently watch and hope for eventual evidences of their election. Additionally, by applying this conceptualization of the self to her own situation, Hutchinson creates a theological space in which she can transcend many of the weaknesses of her mortal state and the limitations attached to her gender. As a result, Hutchinson assumes a priestly and independent religious authority. At a time when nearly 2,000 nonconformist clergymen were forced from their parishes and livelihoods (Spurr 43) and independent believers, such as Hutchinson, were barred from gathering in all but the smallest of conventicles (51), such divinely enabled authority was no doubt essential to Hutchinson's religious life outside the established Church of England. Indeed, based on Hutchinson's perception of her time as a day in which truth was "[clouded] with mists of error" (3), this ability to independently discover and relate the word of God seems to be foundational to Hutchinson's capacity to defy the standing religious order and the civil authorities that supported it.

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