

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY BAPTIST THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

SALEM WITCH TRIALS

Submitted to Dr. Ken Cleaver, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the completion of the course

201540 FALL 2015 CHHI 525-D02 LUO

History of Christianity II

By

Matthew McNutt

December 18, 2015

THESIS STATEMENT

The Salem Witch Trials were the result of a group hysteria, fueled by the words and actions of a few, resulting in the community at large feeding into the frenzy with motivations ranging from fear and genuine belief to revenge and opportunism.

CONTENTS

Introduction	1
A Brief History	2
Context	2
Accusations and Trials	4
Fallout	7
Amplifiers	9
Conclusion	11
Bibliography	13

Introduction

The Salem Witch Trials are a fascinating piece of American Christian history. In 1692, a frenzy of fear and hatred erupted in the small community in Massachusetts, resulting in accusations of witchcraft, the creation of a judicial process for evaluating these accusations, and eventually the executions of nineteen men and women for the charge of witchcraft. In addition, two others died as a result of their interrogations, and 141 were imprisoned.¹ As quickly as it erupted, after ripping through the community, the frenzy disappeared, leaving in its wake a traumatized community, and a discredited clergy and Puritan movement.²

To this day the Salem Witch Trials have an impact on American culture.³ Phrases like “witch hunt” pepper conversation, and a morbid fascination with this brief moment in history still saturates the culture, reflected in movies, TV shows, theatrical productions, reenactments and literature.⁴ Taking the time to understand the influences, outside circumstances and internal instabilities that paved the way for the Salem Witch Trials, reading the documents from the community itself during the time period, and evaluating the aftermath provides a critical look at group dynamics, responses to fear, and mass hysteria, as well as the impact seemingly unrelated events can have in fueling instability that leads to groups acting in ways individuals would not.

¹ Marc Callis, "The Aftermath of the Salem Witch Trials in Colonial America," *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 33, No. 2 (2005): 187.

² Thomas A. Askew, *The American Church Experience: A Concise History* (Grand Rapids: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2008), 43.

³ Marilynne K. Roach, *The Salem Witch Trials: a Day-by-day Chronicle of a Community under Siege* (Boulder, CO: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004), XV.

⁴ Benjamin Ray, "Salem Witch Trials," *OAH Magazine of History*, 17.4 (2003): 32.

A Brief History

The years building up to 1692 were tumultuous ones, full of wars, fighting and uncertainty. From 1675-1676, King Philip's War was devastating to the New England region, and while the local governments survived the conflict, the same could not be said of similar conflicts in Virginia resulting in the colonists there engaging in a civil war.⁵ The so-called Glorious Revolution in England in 1688-1689 led to the overthrow of the governments in New England, New York, and Maryland.⁶

Meanwhile, the Massachusetts Bay Colony charter had been revoked in 1684, with a new charter being negotiated in England in 1692, creating nervousness over how that would turn out and what the ramifications would be for the colony.⁷ In addition, there was "high anxiety" about the war, specifically the front in Maine.⁸ Furthermore, with the revoking of the charter, the clergy had seen their influence significantly decreased. While religion and law had previously been deeply linked, with Puritanism legally mandated in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, that was no longer the case which resulted in tensions between the clergy, government officials, and differing expectations on what part religion should play in legal matters.⁹

⁵ John M. Murrin, "Coming to Terms with the Salem Witch Trials," *Proceedings Of The American Antiquarian Society*, 110, no. 2 (2000): 309.

⁶ *Ibid*, 310.

⁷ Isaac A Reed, "Deep Culture in Action: Resignification, Synecdoche, and Metanarrative in the Moral Panic of the Salem Witch Trials," *Theory and Society*, Volume 44, Issue 1 (2015): 75.

⁸ *Ibid*, 76.

⁹ Peter Charles Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials: A Legal History* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 1997), 75.

John Hale was a pastor from Beverly, Massachusetts, who became closely involved with the Salem Witchcraft trials.¹⁰ He wrote about how it began at the end of 1691, “Mr. Samuel Parris, pastor of the church in Salem Village, had a daughter of nine and a niece of about eleven years of age sadly afflicted of they knew not what distempers; and he made his application to physicians, yet still they grew worse. And at length one physician gave his opinion that they were under an evil hand.”¹¹ While an unusual term today, “evil hand” could only mean one thing to the Puritan colonists; the Devil’s influence was on these two girls.¹²

The two girls were not simply sick; their behavior had become bizarre. They ran around, filled the house with shrieks, and lashed out at those around them. Causing further fear, the symptoms spread to other girls in the community.¹³ Perhaps they were possessed. Some have speculated that the were pretending, using the fear of the “evil hand” to explain away rebellious behavior, but to fake symptoms of stiff limbs, locked joints, extended tongues, sweating, and shivering would have been difficult for anyone, let alone young girls.¹⁴ Most likely it was some sort of illness or breakdown; perhaps asthma, epilepsy, or some sort of delusional psychosis – any of which could be brought on by the situational stress that existed in that colony.¹⁵

¹⁰ Frances Hill, *A Delusion of Satan: the Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials*, Reprint ed. (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 14.

¹¹ Richard Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011), 51.

¹² Reed, *Theory and Society*, 76.

¹³ Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 35.

¹⁴ Hill, *A Delusion of Satan*, 19.

¹⁵ Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 35.

With belief in witchcraft common, the question of who bewitched the growing number of girls became a priority. The first three of what would become hundreds accused that year were Sarah Good, Sarah Osborne and Tituba, a slave owned by Rev. Samuel Parris.¹⁶ Each of them were identified by multiple girls as bewitching them in different ways. The proceedings were drastically different from the current American system; they were arrested, with examination and depositions taken by individuals known to sympathize with the accusers, including the girl's father, Rev. Parris.¹⁷ So as to accommodate all of the people wanting to attend, the trials were held in the meetinghouse, with the accused standing in front of the communion table. It was the largest building in town, which also served as the meeting place for Rev. Parris's church services and sermons railing against the movements of Satan against the town, his ministry specifically, and the need for the people to act.¹⁸

The transcripts reveal a bias against the accused, often times containing additional commentary painting them in a negative light. More shocking, the transcripts reveal judges who came into the trials with their minds already made up. For example, Sarah Good was asked questions by the judge along these lines; "What evil spirit have you familiarity with? Why do you hurt these children? What creature do you employ, then? Why do you not tell us the truth? Why do you thus torment these poor children?"¹⁹ She continued to profess her innocence, as did Sarah Osborne. Tituba, however, after initially denying any involvement confessed during

¹⁶ Reed, *Theory and Society*, 76.

¹⁷ Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, 66.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 67.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 70.

interrogation and implicated both of the other women. Later she would recant, but it was rejected. Records identify her as an Indian, and the motives of her accusers are suspect when taken into consideration that most of her “victims” were from communities recently attacked by Indians.²⁰

In the same vein, there are reasons to suspect the motives in naming Sarah Good as well. Her father had been a wealthy innkeeper, and when he passed away he had left a significant inheritance that should have gone to Sarah. However, the man her mother remarried refused to give it to her. She was homeless and destitute, a lingering accusation of her step-father’s dishonest dealings.²¹ Many of those accused in the coming year of witchcraft had extenuating circumstances like this that call into question the true motives of the accusers. A picture begins to form of colonists taking advantage of growing fear and uncertainty to profit or find revenge.

The next round of accusations followed quickly. Martha Corey, a 72 year old woman known for her piety and commitment to the church, was outspoken about her opposition to the witch trials and her suspicion that the girls were making it up. She was quickly accused by the girls of witchcraft as well, and to her shock found guilty. Both she and her husband were put to death, her for being a witch, him for defending her.²² Reverend Deodat Lawson had been part of the clergy in Salem Village in years previous. He returned to the town when he heard about the witch trials, observed there were ten married and single women and girls “afflicted” by that point

²⁰ Ibid, 82.

²¹ Ibid, 68.

²² Reed, *Theory and Society*, 76.

in time, and wrote this regarding the trial of Martha Corey; “She denied all that was charged upon her and said [that] they could not prove [her] a witch; she was that afternoon committed to Salem Prison; and after she was in custody, she did not so appear to them and afflict them as before.”²³

As the accusations accelerated, a Court of Oyer and Terminer was appointed by the governor, William Phips, to preside over the indictments, trials and penalties.²⁴ However, having formed the court, he then left to be at the front in Maine, and with no formal charter in place for there the colony, there were no significant legal requirements for it to abide by.²⁵ This enabled them to create a controversial court system largely controlled by the community elite that controlled the formation of the jury and limited it to just Congregationalists.²⁶

In a particularly bizarre twist, the way those who pled guilty of witchcraft were handled by this court reinforces the idea that most confessions and accusations were false. Isaac Reed observes that “there were orders to keep alive those who confessed so that they could name their compatriots in witchcraft. This created a perverse incentive structure for the accused, and more pressure on the judges to condemn those who would not confess, so that the Colony could do something to fight the scourge that had taken ahold of Massachusetts.”²⁷ So while those who

²³ Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, 57.

²⁴ Ernest W King and Franklin G. Mixon Jr., “Religiosity and the political economy of the Salem witch trials,” *The Social Science Journal*, Volume 47, Issue 3 (2010): 682.

²⁵ Reed, *Theory and Society*, 77.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

pled their innocence were often found guilty and faced death, others quickly realized a confession would save their lives as long as they implicated others, feeding into a vicious cycle spreading fear throughout the community. Ultimately, they were hoping to identify the leader, whom they eventually believed they found in George Burroughs, the former minister at Salem Village. Almost a decade before he had been the pastor during a time of great conflict and division, resentments from which still lingered years later and created an atmosphere that could be used to both get back at Burroughs for being firm during the time of conflict and evade paying him money that was still owed.²⁸ At this point, he was actually pastoring a church in Maine, but that region fell under the authority of the Massachusetts colony and with accusers calling him the “little wizard,” naming him as the leader who baptized others in the name of the Devil, he was brought back, tried and put to death on August 19th.²⁹

It was not long after that that Phips returned and suspended the court on October 29th. He formed a new one in December, but this time it was based on their new charter which brought along with it significant legal changes creating a more balanced process.³⁰ At this point, 19 had been executed, two had died, and 141 had been imprisoned.³¹ Perhaps it was the new process, perhaps mass hysteria can only sustain its energy for so long; either way the population had calmed down and seemed to be waking up to the horror they had brought on their region with

²⁸ Hill, *A Delusion of Satan*, 56.

²⁹ Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 112.

³⁰ Reed, *Theory and Society*, 77.

³¹ Callis, *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 187.

quiet shock and regret. Under the new court, acquittals happened rapidly – although many were still financially ruined with the lost work, destroyed reputations and requirement to still pay exorbitant prison fees.³² It seems to have served as a pivotal moment in culture in general, with it being the last time anyone was legally accused of witchcraft in New England, and the last time a suspected witch was convicted or executed in any of the English colonies.³³

In a strange twist, Rev. Parris, one of the primary instigators in the witch hunt and whose sermons stoked the flames throughout, tried to position himself as peacemaker and leader in the healing process afterwards. He wrote a meditation for peace, part of which reads as a mild apology, asking for “forgiveness of every offence in this or other affairs, wherein you see or conceive I have erred and offended; professing, in the presence of the Almighty God, that what I have done has been, as for substance, as I apprehended was duty, however through weakness, ignorance, etc., I may have been mistaken ... Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and evil-speaking be put away from you, with all malice; and be you kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ’s sake, hath forgiven you. Amen. Amen.”³⁴ His apologies were not enough; a distrustful congregation and community could not get past his role in the witch hunts and trials, many of whom still felt anger over their loved ones being accused, eventually resulted in his resignation in 1696 and his leaving the village the following year.³⁵

³² Reed, *Theory and Society*, 77.

³³ Callis, *Historical Journal of Massachusetts*, 188.

³⁴ Godbeer, *The Salem Witch Hunt*, 170-171.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 167.

Others also gave apologies for their roles. Government officials claimed ignorance of what was going on in the colony, and created measures to undo it. Many of those directly involved gave public apologies. One such apology was from the twelve who made up the jury. They gave a public apology that was posted with all their signatures. They confessed that they had been unable to understand what they were faced with properly, and because of that they saw that they now had innocent blood on their hands. They wrote that they “humbly beg forgiveness, first of God for Christ’s sake for this our error; and pray that God would not impute the guilt of it to ourselves, nor others; and we also pray that we may be considered candidly and aright by the living sufferers as being then under the power of a strong and general delusion, utterly unacquainted with and not experienced in matters of that nature.”³⁶

Amplifiers

At first glance, the modern reader may assume the beliefs and fears of witchcraft in the seventeenth century were common enough that the witch trials were not unusual. Yes, there had been trials for witches before, but the reality is that nothing had happened even remotely approaching the scale of the group hysteria and number of accusations that were experienced in Salem. However, circumstances in and around Salem that amplified the normal levels of fears and beliefs regarding the supernatural and created an environment where mass hysteria could take place over a season of time.

³⁶ Ibid, 175.

- As previously highlighted, they were a Colony without a Royal Charter. Much like a business facing potential litigation sees its stock fall in value over nervousness about potential outcomes, the uncertainty of how the negotiations would go in the formation of a new Royal Charter created an underlying tension.³⁷
- The military failures in Maine created a need for a distraction that would place the people's attention elsewhere.³⁸ Much like modern culture today fixates on issues of low significance, e.g., what kinds of cups Starbucks uses, Confederate flags, etc., thereby taking their attention away from issues of significant failure or concern, but that lies out of their direct control, e.g., conflicts in North Korea, Ukraine, and the Middle East. Having a crisis locally gave them something they could take control in as opposed to wars and negotiations that impacted them, but were too far away for them to influence.
- Social divisions in Salem Village, longstanding conflicts, desires for revenge, authority, and other personal desires fed into people's suspicions and accusations of one another. It is no coincidence that the majority of the accusations came from the western side of the community and the majority of the accused from the eastern side of the community.³⁹ In addition, other than the handful of "bewitched" accusers, the majority of witnesses were married men and women, while the majority of the accused did not fit typical roles in the community (single, widowed, etc.).⁴⁰

³⁷ Reed, *Theory and Society*, 78.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ King and Mixon Jr., *The Social Science Journal*, 681.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 682.

- In particular, the trials provided an opportunity for the clergy to reassert a diminishing influence in the politics and leadership of the community. Over the course of the accusations and executions, starting in February and ending in November, there are two surges. The first occurs during April and May, when 61 are accused, followed by ten being executed. The second occurs from July to September with 68 being accused and nine executed.⁴¹ Throughout the year, the clergy played a significant role in fueling the flames of hysteria. However, it seems too much of a coincidence that several of their more fiery and triggering sermons happened around the same time as the surges in accusations and executions.⁴² They blasted the community with words demanding action against the demonic influences and their need to fight back against the witches, the attacks of Satan against their community, and the dangers assaulting their very faith and the ministries of their clergy. Some of those sermons were delivered from the same meetinghouse where the accused would stand and face the charges just days later, surrounded by a crowd of people and jurors with fiery messages still ringing in their ears from that same place.

Conclusion

The climate in Salem was ripe for overreaction and group hysteria. While at first glance the issues may seem simple and easy to dismiss, there are volumes of source documents and eye witness accounts that paint a deeper picture. Taken in context with the events surrounding the

⁴¹ Hoffer, *The Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 147-151.

⁴² Reed, *Theory and Society*, 79.

colonies and England, the destabilizing effect wars and an unknown Charter negotiation, a governor spending most of his time away, and individuals looking to capitalize on the opportunity for personal gain – whether individuals pursuing monetary and position gains, or clergy and government officials looking to have more power and influence, it becomes more apparent that it was not simply a mass hysteria fueled by accusations of witchcraft, but instead a pressure cooker waiting for the right pressure to be added to cause an explosion.

Bibliography

- Askew, Thomas A., and Richard V. Pierard. *The American Church Experience: A Concise History*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Callis, Marc. 2005. "The Aftermath of the Salem Witch Trials in Colonial America." *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* 33, no. 2, 187-213.
- Godbeer, Richard. *The Salem Witch Hunt: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2011.
- Hill, Frances. *A Delusion of Satan: the Full Story of the Salem Witch Trials*. Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002.
- Hoffer, Peter Charles. *The Salem Witchcraft Trials: A Legal History*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 1997.
- King, Ernest W. and Franklin G. Mixon Jr. 2010. "Religiosity and the political economy of the Salem witch trials." *The Social Science Journal*, Volume 47, Issue 3, 678-688.
- Murrin, John M. 2000. "Coming to Terms with the Salem Witch Trials." *Proceedings Of The American Antiquarian Society* 110, no. 2: 309-347.
- Ray, Benjamin. 2003. "Salem Witch Trials." *OAH Magazine of History*, 17.4, 32-36.
- Reed, Isaac A. 2015. "Deep Culture in Action: Resignification, Synecdoche, and Metanarrative in the Moral Panic of the Salem Witch Trials." *Theory and Society*, Volume 44, Issue 1, 65-94.
- Roach, Marilynne K. *The Salem Witch Trials: a Day-by-day Chronicle of a Community under Siege*. Lanham, MD: Taylor Trade Publishing, 2004.