

Puritans and salem witch trials



Puritans and the Salem Witch Trials During the time period of 1691 to 1692 the town of Salem, a small thriving community within the Puritan Massachusetts Bay colony, was struck by widespread hysteria in the form of witch trials. The way these trials and accusations played out are historically unlike any other witch trials found in European and American history.

Historians have pointed to a number of economic, political, and social changes of the then existing institutions throughout the Massachusetts Bay area to be the cause of the Salem witch trials, along with the direction they took. If studied closely however, it becomes apparent that the main cause for the Salem witch trials can be found in the way the people of Salem viewed and practiced their religion. In the Massachusetts Bay colony, the established religion was Puritanism, which was derived from a very literal reading of the Bible, and to be more exact, the Old Testament (Boyer). In this colony the laws of religion did not only set the standard for a person's moral compass, but also the laws and institutions of government were centered on the scriptures found in the Bible. Therefore, a slight against God or scripture would be punishable through the law of the colony (Boyer).

This close knit relationship of religion, law, and social status in turn formed a theocracy, and the emphasis placed on these relationships are one of the main contributing factors of the Salem witch trials. (Lorence-4) " Failing to follow the patterns of interaction seen in ordinary witchcraft cases, they were difficult to explain at the time and have puzzled historians ever since" (Harley p. 308). The Puritan religion and the ensuing Massachusetts Bay Colony were both based on the notion of leading by example and showing others how they should truly live their lives and practice religion. John

Winthrop, the Puritan leader pronounced, " For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us," and Puritans truly lived their lives like this (Emerson). Winthrop followed the Covenant of Works and believed that he was chosen to teach God's law to others and apply it to nations.

The most obviously unique feature of New England Puritanism was the church covenant. As John Winthrop explained, " Leave out the covenant and let us see what manner of churches you will constitute. Suppose ten or twenty Christians were desirous to constitute a church. These being met together, every one of them makes a confession of his faith. Will this make them a church? I conceive it will pass the skill of a good logician to make a church without some contract or agreement such as will amount to a covenant" (Emerson). Winthrop therefore, became the leader of the voyage to the New World and was responsible for guiding his fellow Puritans, teaching the laws of God and always showing and demanding perfect obedience from the other Puritans.

He wanted all people to understand that God's rules demanded reciprocal action. Morgan states that, with the people, " He [Winthrop] had sealed a covenant with them and given them a special responsibility to carry out the good intentions that had brought them into the wilderness" (Morgan). And so they carried on, following Winthrop's lead, in hopes to form a new society in which God intended them to do. Winthrop knew it was wrong to let a sin go unpunished. So as people acted up or were disobedient, Winthrop faced the challenge of deciding a proper punishment for each sin or wrong-doing that was committed.

As time passed and there seemed to be little progress in developing a new society, the feelings of defeat and hopelessness spread amongst the settlers. Some of the settlers began breaking away from the group as a whole and developing their own ideas. People were becoming and acting like separatists. Winthrop knew that they would all need to stick together for this to work but he could sense the change in people's attitudes. Separatism amongst the colony caused Winthrop to deal with his greatest challenge in punishing sins.

Anne Hutchinson arrived in New England with her husband, William Hutchinson in September of 1634. Anne Hutchinson held meetings at her house on Sundays to recall what had been said during the church sermon as well as to add her own ideas and thoughts on the topics that were being discussed. At first this seemed very normal but when her teachings began influencing people to pull away from the other Puritans, Winthrop recognized this as a problem. Anne Hutchinson taught others of her numerous propositions, which opposed the purpose of this excursion to New England. Morgan states that, Mrs.

Hutchinson's beliefs, "...threatened the fundamental conviction on which the Puritans built their state, their churches, and their daily lives, namely that God's will could be discovered only through the bible" (Morgan). Anne Hutchinson was in fact an Antinomian, she opposed the fixed meaning of God's moral law that Winthrop had worked so hard to teach these people. As a result, Mrs. Hutchinson was causing a huge threat to the settlers.

She was trying to manipulate others to share her religious beliefs. Winthrop would not tolerate such behavior, as she was behaving sinfully, she must be punished accordingly or else as Winthrop believed, they would all suffer from God's wrath. Winthrop took Mrs. Hutchinson to a court hearing and after a long, battle it was decided by the court that Mrs.

Hutchinson was to be banished from Massachusetts. Mrs. Hutchinson was set as an example for the others who may have also had sinful thoughts to separate from God's rules or misbehave. Puritans also believed in the idea of predestination, in which those who were to be saved and damned had already been decided by God and that nothing they could do could change this.

However, when the Massachusetts Bay colony was first formed, in order to become a citizen you had to be a member of the church, and in order to be a member of the church you had to be what was called a " visible saint. "

Puritans believed that a distinction could be made between people who were saved and damned by the way they lived their lives and how closely they modeled their lives to the Bible. Consequently, they felt that those who strictly upheld the Bible were those who were saved, and in turn were visible saints. This line of thinking set up a community in which a person's religiosity determined their status in a community. The Puritan community became one in which religion became a main focal point, as well as one in which people were continually examining the actions of their neighbors trying to determine whether they could truly be considered a visible saint. (Lorence-4)It was common belief in the Puritan religion that the Devil existed and was on a continual mission to turn Christians from God.

This belief was expressed in a sermon of Samuel Parris in which he stated: “ John 6: 70. ‘ Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil. ’ Our Lord Jesus Christ knows how many Devils there are in his Church, and who they are. (Lorence-5).

Sermons such as these set the mood of Salem during the time of the Salem witch trials. Puritans not only believed in the presence of the evil, but they came under the impression that the devil was among them in the form of other church members. From this a sense of uneasiness is furthered, and Puritans began to look even closer at the actions of their fellow church members to determine if they were truly a visible saint. Puritans of the time were continually looking to the Bible in order to explain such things as disease, war, and even bad luck. The conclusion was drawn that all of these things were the work of the devil (Boyer).

Coincidentally, the times surrounding the Salem witch trials happened to be a very troubling time for the Puritan-Salem community. Around the time of the trials, an epidemic of small pox ripped through the small community of Salem, as well as the presence of a continual war with the Native Americans along the frontier suggested the presence of the devil. At the time, the Massachusetts Bay colony also lost its charter, which by some was equated with a sense of failure in the Puritan’s mission to form a city on a hill.

Instances such as these suggested that the devil’s strength/presence was growing and could be explained by the presence of witches and wizards among the Puritan congregations. When Doctor Griggs suggested that the behavior of “ the afflicted” girls of Salem was the cause of witchcraft, the hysteria of the Salem witch trials began. Instances of how people, such as

William Stacy, explained a broken wagon wheel to be the work of witchcraft, found in his testimony against Bridget Bishop, exemplified the logic people of this time began to use.

People began to equate anything negative, even bad luck, with the work of the devil, and in particular, the work of witches and wizards (Boyer). The way the Puritan community was set up, was that scripture was to be taken literally, and to openly disagree with what was found in scripture was found to be blasphemous. Therefore, the mention of the devil and witches demanded the belief of their existence. " Scripture gives us no medium (Lorence-5). " Lawmakers in turn looked to the Bible for guidance and found passages, which stated that witches and devils alike should be put to death.

Thus, being found guilty of being a witch/wizard was considered a capital offense. " Oh! It is a dreadful thing to be a devil, and yet to sit down at the Lord's table. Such incur the hottest of God's wrath (1 Cor. 10: 21-22). " (Lorence-5) Puritans now believed that " as good Puritans" they must continue to seek out and prosecute witches and wizards alike (Boyer).

With the allegations of witchcraft, the new governor, Sir William Phips, created the Court of Oyer and Terminer (Boyer). " A sense of hysteria soon gripped the entire region" (Detweiler p. 597). This court was put in place to try people accused of witchcraft, and Sir Phips placed William Stoughton to head this court up.

Stoughton however had no legal education, but was praised for his preaching ability exemplified in his sermons as a church pastor. As a minister, and a stout Puritan, Stoughton followed the laws of the Old Testament and

continued the prosecution of supposed witches and wizards. In any other court system found among the colonies, it is very unlikely that someone like Stoughton would be placed in a position of power. However, the Massachusetts Bay area was unlike any other colony, and because such a heavy emphasis was placed on someone's religiosity, Stoughton was a perfect fit. After examining the foundational institutions of the Massachusetts Bay area, specifically, their reliance on religion; it is obvious that the hysteria of the Salem witch trials can be attributed to the community's heavy emphasis on religion and a literal reading of the Bible. The literal reading of the Bible allowed for the belief of a growing presence of witches, along with the notion that the offense of witchcraft was a capital offense.

Also, people who followed and believed in these ideas were placed in positions of power, and were responsible for forming and carrying out the laws of the community. Within the Puritan community there was a clear lack of a divide between law and church, and this too played a large factor in the outcome of the Salem witch trials. Puritans relied a great deal on scripture and the idea of a constant threat of the devil set the stage for a very unsettled community in which accusations such as these were not viewed as obscene. A society based on fear had been erected in which people feared their neighbors, the unknown, and the devil, and the Salem witch trials were the result. All of these things coupled with instances of social, economic, and religious strife distinct to the Salem area created the hysteria of the Salem witch trials. However, if it were not for the community's strong ties and understanding of religion the Salem witch trials would have never happened.

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