

The Puritan Religion and the Salem Witch Trials

Stephanie Miller

The Salem witch trials, which were conducted during the years 1692-1693, were a dark time in American history. It is a part of this country's past that will live on forever, one where the people who lost their lives will always be remembered in history books as a great tragedy. The chaos and uncertainty that accompanied those times remain a hot topic of discussion, and the events and texts of those times are still studied today. While there were a few different causes that fueled the trials, perhaps one of the most prominent ones was the Puritan religion. But just how much of an effect did this religion have on the Salem witch trials? There is no doubt that religion was very important to the people of New England during this time, and it was taken very seriously. The first English settlers of America left Great Britain in search of religious freedom and most of them were Puritans. This religion had a great effect on what happened during the Salem witch trials and why the trials took the road they did.

In 1630 John Winthrop was the governor of Massachusetts. The ship that he arrived on, the *Arbella*, was part of a fleet that carried some of the earliest settlers from England to the New World. This new expedition of colonializing the New World led Winthrop to deliver his famous sermon, "A Model of Christian Charity," which would come to be widely associated with the phrase, "a City upon a Hill." When referring to "a City upon a Hill," Winthrop was using the analogy of how the Puritans were to be the shining example for the people of the new colonies. Their Puritan faith was to be the beacon of light and hope, and they were to set the standards of what a good and Godly life ought to be. When speaking of Winthrop's sermon, Edmund S. Morgan said that, "It offers an explicit statement...of the idea that the Bay Colony was in covenant with God, a chosen people, a new Israel. It has accordingly become the very emblem of the Puritan quest, the manifesto in which Winthrop proclaimed the place of Massachusetts as a "city upon a hill"¹. Although

¹ Edmund S. Morgan, "John Winthrop's 'Model of Christian Charity' in a Wider Context," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 50, no. 2 (1987): 145-151.

Winthrop did not settle in Salem, the Puritan beliefs carried on throughout most of New England and they all followed relatively the same beliefs.

Puritanism was officially formed during the reign of Elizabeth I, who was the last surviving child of King Henry VIII. Her sister Mary, who ruled before her, had been a Catholic and was attempting to restore Catholicism in England after her father's establishment of the Church of England. During Mary's reign, she attempted to rid the country of Protestants which resulted in a violent pursuit, and Mary had many of them executed; this earned her the nickname Bloody Mary. Elizabeth's religious beliefs did not exactly line up with her sister's, and therefore, during her reign, she led England back on track to follow the Church of England. There was great division among the people as religions clashed, and people found it difficult to get along. When Elizabeth ascended the throne, she welcomed the Protestants back and turned the tables on the Catholics; it was now their turn to face religious persecutions. However, some of the Protestants did not agree with the way Elizabeth was running the Church, which led to a further split among the people. This division would break off into another section of Protestantism, and it is during this time that Puritanism is seen to have been fully established. There were two major beliefs in Puritanism that set it apart from Catholicism and the Church of England. The first was that Puritanism followed more closely to the scripture than most other Protestants did. The second was that it simply enforced the practice of anti-Catholicism. Puritans believed that the wrongdoings in the Catholic religion came directly from the Pope, and therefore they wanted to separate themselves from being under his rule. Francis J. Brenner states that, "For the Puritans...the papacy was the source of all doctrinal and ceremonial errors that had taken the church off the course initially set by Christ and his early disciples."² Puritans wanted a religion free from the Pope, and one that followed closely to the scriptures for their teachings.

In Salem, religion was extremely important, and the majority of the people that lived there during the trials were Puritans. Marilyn J. Westerkamp states that, "the colonizers were mostly Puritans, and their identity as Puritans would come to define not only the religious organizations but also the cultural climate, social

² Francis J. Brenner *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York. Oxford University Press, 2009), 7.

environment, and political structures of New England through the next century.”³

Puritanism was the religion that was there during the start of the colonies and it had a major influence on the colony’s growth and development. It was the foundation that New England was built on, and the Puritan beliefs greatly affected most areas of how the colonies were established.

For Puritans, staying loyal and true to God was the number one priority in their lives, and it was something that they strived to do every day. To them, witchcraft was just the opposite of this. Witchcraft was seen to be in association with the devil, which was just about as far away as a person could stray from their faith. In order for someone to become a Witch, it was believed that a person had to have had direct contact with the devil and that they signed his book. That is why when the accusations of witchcraft being practiced in Salem Village started to arise, the fear spread very fast and the accusations were taken very seriously. Bryan F. Le Beau said that “the accused were believed to have been enticed into their heretical beliefs by the devil. They were charged with having participated in nocturnal rituals presided over by the devil, wherein they engaged in orgies, renounced Christ, desecrated the Crucifix, and paid homage to the devil.”⁴ It is very easy to see how much this would be frowned upon by the Puritans and also why fear was such a large part of what fueled the trials; in order for people to be witches, there had to be some sort of direct contact with the devil. Because of the rash and ill judgement fear often brings to people, it caused a lot of trouble for the villagers of Salem, even for those who were innocent.

Accusations seemed to be coming from every corner. Even if there was no proof behind an accusation, it would still be investigated in some form to either clear the person’s name or take the necessary steps in order to rid the village of the witch. Consorting with the devil was one of the worst sins a person could commit, and the people of Salem truly believed that they needed to root out the evil that they thought was infesting their village. If they did nothing, then the threat would spread, and more and more people would fall victim to the witches and devil. There were several young girls who lived in the Salem Village, such as Abigail Williams, who were

³ Marilyn J. Westerkamp, *Women and Religion in Early America, 1600-1850: The Puritan and Evangelical Traditions* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 10.

⁴ Bryan Le Beau, *Story of The Salem Witch Trials* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 5.

accusing some of the local women of being witches and said that they were using their powers to make them ill. The young girls would go into fits and have seizures, and their bodies would move and convulse in an unnatural way. Elizabeth Reis gives an insightful view into what could have been the cause of this when she says:

Abigail Williams, Betty Paris, and others continued to experience their afflictions and to accuse people of witchcraft. We will never know exactly why, but whether accusers and witnesses sincerely believed that the accused had signed a devil's pact and afflicted others, whether they contemplated political or familial revenge, whether they simply continued to play a game that had gotten out of hand, whether they pursued a strategy to deflect suspicion from themselves, or whether they calculated fraud, they knew that their stories would be believed. In their religious world witchcraft accusations...were credible and demanded action because they were so threatening.⁵

The Puritan religion required all accusations to be taken seriously, even if the person accused was a God-fearing person who always attended church and lived a good life. There was no one safe from the investigation once they were accused, no matter how good of a religious person they were.

While those who were judging the accused were using their faith as a guideline, those who were persecuted were also using their faith to see them through their hardships. Mary Easty is an example of how some of the accused kept hold of their faith, even when they were in the position of losing their lives. She was wrongly accused and convicted of witchcraft, but she did not let that ruin her hold on her faith, nor did it lead her to turn her back on God. Easty could have saved her life by admitting to using witchcraft and publicly giving herself to God to be saved; as long as the accused confessed to the crime of witchcraft and agreed to change their life for the better, they would be saved from being executed. Tituba, a woman from the West Indies who moved to Salem, accepted this plea for her life and was allowed to live despite her involvement with witchcraft. In regard to this guilty plea, Lori Lee Wilson explains that "those who confessed were not executed. The magistrates reasoned that witches who confessed had repented of their sins, and the devil was no longer with them. Besides, they were useful as witnesses against those who insisted

⁵ Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 7-8.

they were innocent. Those who defended their innocence in spite of the testimony of confessed witches and spectral evidence of the afflicted were hanged”.⁶ Tituba confessed to what it was that she had done wrong and had also given the magistrates names of other women who she said were also practicing witchcraft. The admission of guilt was a way for people to escape death, but Easty would not take that plea; as a Puritan, she believed that it was better to be truthful and honest than to lie to save her own life. By lying, she could have endangered her soul which would have been much worse than dying by a false accusation. If she died while remaining close to God, then she had a good chance of entering Heaven after her death; if she lied, she might have saved her mortal body, but by doing so she could have condemned herself to spend eternity in Hell. These were just some of the views that the Puritans believed and how their faith was an important part of the trials. While Easty was ready to lose her life for holding on to her truths, she was also willing to sacrifice herself in order for others to be spared.

In her final plea, Easty begged that she would be the last innocent life to be lost on the accusation of witchcraft and that the judges would be able to see their wrong doings and spare the other lives that were put before them. In her petition she states:

I petition to your honors not for my own life, for I know I must die, and my appointed time is set. But the Lord He knows it is, that if it be possible, no more innocent blood may be shed...I question not but your honors does to the utmost of your powers in the discovery and detecting of witchcraft, and witches, and would not be guilty of innocent blood for the world. But by my own innocence I know you are in the wrong way. The Lord in His infinite mercy directs you in this great work, if it be His blessed will, that no more innocent blood be shed.⁷

Easty was willing to allow herself to be a victim of the unjust judgement cast on her, as long as others would be spared the same fate. She knew that the standards and logic that the judges and accusers were using to condemn people was flawed and that many more would die if they continued down this path. Therefore, she knew something had to change in order for things to take a turn for the better. Easty could have been very spiteful and hateful towards those who were condemning her, but her

⁶ Lori Lee Wilson, *The Salem Witch Trials* (Minneapolis: The Lerner Publishing Group, 1999), 27.

⁷ “Petition of Mary Easty.”

petition was full of selflessness and compassion. Her petition shows just how much her faith meant to her and how it was a central point in her life.

Susannah Martin was another woman during the Salem witch trials who was accused of using witchcraft. During her trial, she was a little more aggressive to her judges and accusers than Easty was, but her point was the same as hers; that she was innocent and that she would not lie to save herself. She stated that, "I desire to lead my life according to the word of God."⁸ When asked if she would lie, she replied, "I would not tell a lye if it would save my life."⁹ She knew lying could save her but refused to go down that path. It was better to die while telling the truth than to live a lie. They then asked her if she would tell the truth, to which she replied, "I have spoken nothing else."¹⁰ Both of these women were honest and truthful and did no harm to anyone, and yet their lives were taken from them.

Arthur Miller's famous play, *The Crucible*, also touches on the subject of taking the guilty plea. Although his play is not completely historically accurate, he based his characters on real people who lived during the trials and did his best to be as accurate and truthful to the real-life situations as he could. In Miller's notes on the historical accuracy of his play, he states that, "The fate of each character is exactly that of his historical model, and there is no one in the drama who did not play a similar—and in some cases exactly the same—role in history"¹¹. In Miller's play, John Proctor was a man who was convicted of witchcraft. After he and several other men joined forces to attempt to save their wives from being executed, Proctor and some of the other men found themselves in line with their wives to have their lives taken. Proctor, like the other accused, was given the option to sign a confession and have his life spared, as Tituba had done. It took some convincing, but Proctor seemed willing to sign the confession and start a new life. But once it was mentioned that his confession would be posted publicly for all the village people to see, Proctor refused. What is interesting about this situation is that Proctor knew that by lying with his confession, he was damning his soul. He accepted that in exchange for his life. But he could not and would not allow his name to be ruined in the eyes of the people of Salem. This was where he drew the line. When he was asked why he would not allow his name on

⁸ "Examination of Susannah Martin."

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Arthur Miller, *The Crucible* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 2.

the confession to be placed in public, he replied, "Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life! Because I lie and sign myself to lies! Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul; leave me my name!"¹² Proctor was also struggling with the idea of betraying his friends whom he had fought so hard beside in the attempt to free their wives. He knew that if he signed a confession, it would be like turning his back on them and make what they fought for seem like nothing.

While Easty and Martin were using religion to help them navigate the messy waters they were in, those who were judging them were doing the same. John Hathorne was one of the judges who conducted the Salem witch trials. He and the other judges believed that what they were doing was right. They truly believed that they needed to get rid of whoever was associated with witchcraft. Unfortunately, this left little room for proper trials to happen, and the judges of the Salem trials are now looked upon with anger and frustration. How could these men have killed twenty innocent people? The reasoning behind this is that, as mentioned earlier in the essay, witchcraft was strongly believed to have connections with the devil. Reis explains that, "In the Puritan world Satan's appearance signaled God's severe displeasure. And once Satan had successfully gained access to an individual or a community at large, Puritans believed he was very difficult to exorcise"¹³. To have this kind of threat hanging over the people of this village was just unacceptable and drastic measures needed to be made in order to save the people of Salem. Hathorne and the other judges saw what they were doing as a necessary act to save the village, and they were blind to the evil that was coming from their actions. To them, the executions were a necessary part of ridding the village of the witches, and their actions were seen as just by a lot of people. The fear that was consuming the people of the village was enough for the pleas of the innocently accused to fall on deaf ears. Only by confessing and pledging a life devoted to God would their life be spared, and not everyone who was accused was willing to risk losing their soul for their mortal life.

The Salem witch trials lead to a lot of tragedies and unjust actions, and there can be no denying the horrible and unnecessary way that the twenty people lost their

¹² Miller, *The Crucible*, 133.

¹³ Elizabeth Reis, *Damned Women: Sinners and Witches in Puritan New England* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), 7.

lives. It is a shame that the Puritan religion played such an important part in the bad outcome of the trials, seeing as many people look to religion as a comfort and use it to guide them through life. The Puritans attempted to be good and Godly people, but it would seem that they let their religious beliefs get out of hand in an extreme way. While it is not wrong to want to follow religious beliefs and practice them, people cannot allow them to rule their lives in a negative way. Religion can often help people see the good in bad situations and can bring out the best in people; most religions practice compassion and charity. But the judges of the Salem trials were so caught up in expelling every trace of witchcraft that they were blind to the good and innocent people placed before them. They seemed determined to only see the negative side of things during the trials and seemed to completely forget that these were actual people that they were dealing with, and not just some evil manifestation. If they had taken a step back and truly observed what was going on, the trials could have had a totally different outcome. Instead, they were rash and excessive, and innocent people paid the price for this.

While the judges let their religious views on witchcraft get out of hand, those accused also used their religion as a way to hold on to hope. Easty and Martin were determined to hold on to their faith in God and allowed His will to be done. They did not lose faith and knew that if they remained loyal to God, they would get their reward in the afterlife. They used their Puritan faith as a way to keep themselves from falling into despair and did not let the dark situation they were in bring them to despair in God. They seemed to have a very different view of things than the judges and their accusers did, and while both sides were heavily relying on their faith, the side of the accused allowed their religion to continue to be a beacon of hope in their lives, while the accusers and judges allowed their faith to be turned into fear and ruled their lives in a dark way.

The Salem witch trials are a lesson on how much religion can have an effect on the lives of people, and how it can be turned into something ugly. It was not a bad thing for the Puritans to want to live a life that was closely associated with God, it was their religion and it was very important to them. However, there is the blatantly obvious negative affect that this had on the accused people of Salem Village, and it should be a reminder for people to always be vigilant in what path they are allowing their religion to take them on.