

GREAT DEBATES IN AMERICAN HISTORY

Unit 1: How Should Society Balance the Need for Tolerance with the Need to Protect Itself?

The Issue

Accusations of witchcraft swept through the village of Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692 and led to the convening of a special court to hear evidence about the charges. This court eventually convicted and executed 19 “witches” and two dogs at the gallows and ordered one man to be crushed to death beneath heavy stones. After the hysteria had subsided, some people began to question the need for and legitimacy of the witch trials.

Background

The Puritans came to New England to create a religious society where they could live in harmony, submit to a central government, and worship in a common church. Religion was the controlling force in Puritan life. Puritans believed they were participants in a cosmic struggle between an omnipotent God and a menacing Satan. Fearing interference from outsiders and division from within, the Puritans lived by rigid codes of conduct and were intolerant of religious, political, or social dissension.

During the 1500s and 1600s tens of thousands of “witches,” mainly women, were hunted down and executed in Europe. As in some of those cases, the Salem witch hunt began when a group of young girls claimed they had been bewitched by agents of the Devil. The accused witches were generally middle-aged women who were eccentric and unpopular in the community. Soon hysteria turned neighbor against neighbor. As the accusations spread to the most unlikely of defendants, the special court heard evidence, handed down convictions, and carried out executions.

The Readings

The following debate begins with an excerpt from Cotton Mather’s *The Wonders of the Invisible World*. A third-generation minister and, at age 29, the head of the Puritan church in Boston, Mather was considered an expert on demonic possession. Published in 1692, Mather’s book provides a detailed account of both the court proceedings and the activities of the Devil in the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

In 1697 Boston merchant Robert Calef analyzed the Salem trials and the writings of Cotton Mather in a book with the sarcastic title *More Wonders of the Invisible World*. Unable to find a New England printer, Calef published the book in London in 1700. Thomas Brattle was a 24-year-old Boston merchant who had achieved some distinction as a mathematician and astronomer. A critic of the Puritan theocracy, Brattle described the Salem trials in a privately circulated letter dated October 1692.

Update

Eventually the colonial governor of Massachusetts ordered a halt to the witch trials, and most of the accusers, judges, prosecuting attorneys, and juries confessed their errors and begged forgiveness. Although no citizen has been tried for witchcraft since that time, many Americans have been persecuted as a result of their religions, ethnic backgrounds, and political beliefs. Whether Catholics, Mormons, Japanese Americans, or socialists, these Americans—like the “witches” at Salem—were accused of posing a threat to society. In fact, Arthur Miller’s famous play about the Salem incident, *The Crucible*, is also a parable about another kind of “witch trial,” one that took place during the McCarthy era of the 1950s when hundreds of Americans were accused of being communists.

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Cotton Mather, *writer and Puritan minister, wrote this account of the Salem witch trials in 1692.*

THE NEW ENGLANDERS are a People of God settled in those which were once the Devil's Territories; and it may easily be supposed that the Devil was exceedingly disturbed when he perceived such a People here accomplishing the Promise of old made unto our Blessed Jesus, That He should have the Utmost Parts of the Earth for his Possession.

Wherefore the Devil is now making one Attempt more upon us; an Attempt more Difficult, more Surprizing, more snarl'd with unintelligible Circumstances than any that we have hitherto Encountered; . . .

We have been advised by some Credible Christians yet alive that a Malefactor, accused of Witchcraft as well as Murder, and Executed in this place more than Forty Years ago, did then give Notice of An Horrible Plot against the Country by Witchcraft, and a Foundation of Witchcraft, then laid, which if it were not seasonably discovered would probably Blow up, and pull down all the Churches in the Country. And we have now with Horror seen the Discovery of such a Witchcraft! An Army of Devils is horribly broke in upon the place which is the Center, and after a sort, the First-born of our English Settlements. . . .

. . . several of them have been Convicted of a very Damnable Witchcraft: yea, more than One Twenty have Confessed that they have signed unto a Book which the Devil show'd them, and Engaged in his Hellish Design of Bewitching and Ruining our Land. . . .

Now, by these Confessions 'tis Agreed That the Devil has made a dreadful knot of Witches in the Country, and by the help of Witches has dreadfully increased that Knot: That these Witches have driven a Trade of Commisioning their Confederate Spirits to do all sorts of Mischiefs to the Neighbours . . .

The Tryal of Bridget Bishop, alias Oliver, At the Court of Oyer and Terminer Held at Salem, June 2, 1692

She was indicted for Bewitching of several Persons in the Neighborhood, the Inditment being drawn up according to the Form in such Cases usual. And pleading Not Guilty, there were brought in several persons who had long undergone many kinds of Miseries, which were preternaturally inflicted, and generally ascribed unto an horrible Witchcraft. There was little occasion to prove the Witchcraft, it being evident and notorious to all beholders. Now to fix Witchcraft

on the Prisoner at the Bar, the first thing used was the Testimony of the Bewitched; whereof several testifi'd That the Shape of the Prisoner did oftentimes very grievously Pinch them, Choak them, Bite them, and Afflict them; urging them to write their Names in a Book, which the said Spectre called Ours. . . .

"An Army of Devils is horribly broke in upon the place which is the Center . . . of our English Settlements."

Cotton Mather

To crown all, John Bly and William Bly testify'd That being employ'd by Bridget Bishop to help to take down the Cellar-wall of the old house wherein she formerly lived, they did in holes of the said old Wall find several Poppets [i.e., dolls], made of Rags and Hogsbistles, with headless Pins in them, the Points being outward; whereof she could give no account unto the Court that was reasonable or tolerable. . . .

One thing that made against the Prisoner was her being evidently convicted of gross Lying in the court, several times, while she was making her plea; but besides this, a Jury of Women found a preternatural Teat upon her Body: But upon a second search, within 3 or 4 hours, there was no such thing to be seen.*

* Editor's note: Unusual marks or growths found on the body, sometimes called "preternatural excrescences," were believed to be "witches teats" used to nurse demons.

Source: G. L. Burr, ed. *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968).

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Robert Calef, a Boston merchant, wrote this analysis of the witchcraft trials in 1697.

THE DEVIL has been too hard for us by his Temptations, signs, and lying Wonders, with the help of pernicious notions, formerly imbibed and professed; together with the Accusations of a parcel of possessed, distracted, or lying Wenches, accusing their Innocent Neighbours, pretending they see their Spectres (i.e.) Devils in their likeness Afflicting of them, and that God in righteous Judgment (after Men had ascribed his Power to Witches, of Commissionating Devils to do these things) may have given them over to strong delusions to believe lyes, etc. And to let loose the Devils of Envy, Hatred, Pride, Cruelty, and Malice against each other; yet still disguised under the Mask of Zeal for God, and left them to the branding one another with the odious Name of Witch; and upon the Accusation of those above mentioned, Brother to Accuse and Prosecute Brother, Children their Parents, Pastors and Teachers their immediate Flock unto death; Shepherds becoming Wolves, Wise Men Infatuated; People hauled to Prisons, with a bloody noise pursuing to, and insulting over, the (true) Sufferers at Execution, while some are fleeing from the call'd Justice, Justice it self fleeing before such Accusations . . .

All which Tragedies, tho begun in one Town, or rather by one Parish, has Plaguelike spread more than through that Country. And by its Echo giving a brand of Infamy to this whole Country throughout the World. . . .

None of these [unexplained illnesses] being in the least capable of proving the Indictment; The supposed Criminals were Indicted for Afflicting, etc., such and such particular persons by Witchcraft, to which none of these Evidences have one word to say, and the Afflicted and Confessors being declared not enough, the matter needs yet further explaining.

Thomas Brattle, Boston merchant and astronomer, wrote and circulated this letter in October 1692.

I CANNOT BUT CONDEMN this method of the justices, of making this touch of the hand a rule to discover witchcraft; because I am fully persuaded that it is sorcery, and a superstitious method, and that which we have no rule for, either from reason or religion. . . .

This Salem philosophy some men may call the new philosophy; but I think it rather deserves the name of Salem superstition and sorcery, and it is not fit to be named in a land of such light as New England is . . .

But let this pass with the Salem Gentlemen for never so plain and natural a demonstration; yet certain is it that the reasonable part of the world, when acquainted herewith, will laugh at the demonstration, and conclude that the said Salem gentlemen are

actually possessed, at least, with ignorance and folly. . . .

These confessors, as they are called, do very often contradict themselves, as inconsistently as is usual for any crazed, distempered person to do. . . . the judges vindicate these confessors and salve their contradictions by proclaiming that the devil takes away their memory and imposes upon their brain. . . .

If the devil does actually take away the memory of them at some times, certainly the devil, at other times, may very reasonably be thought to affect their fancies . . .

They are searched by a jury; and as to some of them, the jury brought in, that on such or such a place there was a preternatural excrescence. And I wonder what person there is, whether man or woman, of whom it cannot be said but that, in some part of their body or other, there is a preternatural excrescence.

Source: G. L. Burr, ed. *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases*. (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1968).

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Thomas Brattle

GREAT DEBATES WORKSHEET 1

Directions: Use the information in the Unit 1 debate to answer the following questions. If necessary, use an additional sheet of paper.

A. Comprehension

1. What is Cotton Mather's warning to the Puritans of New England?

2. Robert Calef believes that other "Devils" have been "let loose" in Salem. To whom does he refer?

3. What evidence does Mather say was brought against Bridget Bishop at her witchcraft trial?

4. According to Thomas Brattle, "This Salem philosophy . . . rather deserves the name of Salem _____."

B. Critical Thinking

1. **Identifying Central Issues:** In what ways does Cotton Mather view the witch trials differently than either Robert Calef or Thomas Brattle?

2. **Recognizing Bias:** Cotton Mather's justification of the witch trials was influenced by his religious beliefs. How are these beliefs reflected in his writings?

3. **Demonstrating Reasoned Judgment:** Explain why you agree or disagree with the following statement. The Salem witch trials had more to do with intolerance than they did with witchcraft.

4. **Testing Conclusions:** Evaluate the arguments on both sides of the debate. Which side's arguments are most effective and convincing? Use specific reasons and examples to support your position.

