

CALVIN'S THEOLOGY AND THE PURITAN RESPONSE TO WITCHCRAFT IN SALEM

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CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Calvin and Witchcraft	2
Calvin on Punishment for Witchcraft	5
Witchcraft Trials in 16th-Century Switzerland.....	9
Three Traits Observed.....	10
Puritan Pastors and Witchcraft.....	10
The Threat of Evil	11
A Pact With the Devil	13
A Healthy Dose of Skepticism.....	14
The Puritan Culture and Witchcraft	16
The Threat of Witchcraft.....	16
A Partnership with Satan.....	17
An Unhealthy Dose of Hysteria.....	18
Conclusion	19
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY	21

Introduction

The Salem Witch Trials are infamous in American history as an example of an hysterical response to accusations of witchcraft. In modern scholarship, speculation has been offered regarding the possible causes of the reaction to sorcery in seventeenth-century Massachusetts. A popular theory suggests that the frenzied reaction was due to the Calvinist theology of the Puritans which intensified the response to witchcraft in Salem.¹ Marilynne K. Roach inferred that strict Calvinist theology was to blame for the Puritans's views on witchcraft and evil.² R. Trevor Davies wrote, "The most zealous of all Protestant persuasions, Calvinism, excelled all others in its zeal against witchcraft."³ Such views in recent academia regarding the Puritan community in which the trials occurred give rise to the question of how influential Calvin's theology was on the events in Salem from the Winter of 1692 through the Spring of 1693.

Though the occurrence in Salem is arguably the most infamous in world history, witch trials were not limited to seventeenth-century American colonies. Rodney Stark reported that witch trials were common occurrences in Europe and America, particularly from the fourteenth through the sixteenth centuries.⁴ Witch trials were common in sixteenth-century Geneva prior to and during the time of John Calvin's leadership in the church and local government. Davies

¹ Laura Marvel, *The Salem Witch Trials: Devilish Hypocrites in the Church* (San Diego: Greenhaven Press, 2003), 43.

² Marilynne K. Roach, *Six Women of Salem: The Untold Story of the Accused and Their Accusers in the Salem Witch Trials*, (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2013), 53.

³ R. Trevor Davies, *Four Centuries of Witch-Beliefs*, (New York: Benjamin Boom, Inc. 1972), 5; Will Durant described Geneva in the seventeenth century as a horrific place to live and painted Calvin as a despot: "...we shall always find it hard to love the man who darkened the human soul with the most absurd and blasphemous conception of God in all the long and honored history of nonsense." Will Durant, *The Reformation: A History of European Civilization from Wyclif to Calvin: 1300-1564*, (New York, NY: MJF Books, 1985), 459-90.

⁴ Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-hunts, and the End of Slavery*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 250-55.

wrote, “Calvin himself and his followers in Geneva were conspicuous beyond all others, even in this age, for their zeal in witch-killing.”⁵ Hugh R. Trevor-Roper viewed Calvin as a catalyst that exacerbated the trials and execution of people accused of witchcraft in Geneva during this period. In his book *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Trevor-Roper referred to Calvin as “a formidable witch-hunter.”⁶ He added that pre-Calvin Geneva had been “free from witch-trials” and “Calvin introduced a new reign of terror: in the sixty years after his coming, one hundred and fifty witches were burned.”⁷ Such scathing indictments suggest that Calvinist theology could lead to the intense persecution of persons suspected of witchcraft.

The aim of this paper is to determine the amount of influence of Calvinist theology on the Salem Witch Trials. In order to accomplish this goal, John Calvin’s writings and the response to witchcraft in Geneva under Calvin’s leadership will be reviewed. Second, a survey of the views regarding witchcraft within the writings of Puritan clergymen such as Richard Baxter and Cotton Mather will be observed. Finally, the public perception of supernatural activity among the Puritan community in seventeenth-century New England will be explored.

Calvin and Witchcraft

John Calvin did not detail the practice of witchcraft or sorcery in his magnum opus *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), one of the most famous and earliest known

⁵ Davies, 5.

⁶ Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, *The European Witch-Craze of the 16th and 17th Centuries and Other Essays*, (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), 170.

⁷ Trevor-Roper, 136–41.

Systematic Theologies. Calvin only used witchcraft as an observance of the schemes of the devil, such as the use of the word “divination” in the sixteenth chapter of Book II.⁸ However, Calvin held a clear position on the struggle between good and evil that exists within God’s creation.

Calvin wrote:

It is evident to all who can see, that the world is inundated with more than an ocean of evils, that it is overrun with numerous destructive pests, that every thing is fast verging to ruin, so that we must altogether despair of human affairs, or vigorously and even violently oppose such immense evils. And the remedy is rejected for no other reason, but because we have been accustomed to the evils so long. But let public error be tolerated in human society; in the kingdom of God nothing but his eternal truth should be heard and regarded, which no succession of years, no custom, no confederacy, can circumscribe.⁹

Calvin continued in describing evil as a corruption of what God created to be good.¹⁰ Therefore, witchcraft is a symptom of the corruption present in mankind—reliance on a power other than that of God. Calvin described mankind as being at “perpetual war” with Satan and his forces.¹¹ By this reasoning, the use of witchcraft would be viewed by Calvin as fraternizing with the enemy.

Calvin’s writings portrayed a view of Satan’s influence on mankind as real and imminent, representing a genuine threat to the Christian. He used the words “divination” and “bewitched” in his commentary on the book of Acts to describe those who had been overtaken by the schemes

⁸ John Calvin, “*Institutes 2.14*” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 1, Henry Bevrige, ed., (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 193.

⁹ Calvin, “Dedication” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 1, 32.

¹⁰ “...not any thing in the universe is evil in its nature; since neither the depravity and wickedness of men and evils, nor the sins which proceed from that source, are from its mere nature, but from a corruption of nature...”. Calvin, “*Institutes 1.14*” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 1, 153.

¹¹ Calvin, “*Institutes 1.14.15*” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 1, 162.

of the devil.¹² For example: “But the question is, why God doth grant Satan so great liberty, as to suffer him to deceive miserable men, and to bewitch them with divinations?”¹³ Calvin acknowledged the devil’s ability to seduce and manipulate the willing.

In his work *The Last Four Books of Moses, A Harmony* (1555), Calvin provided his interpretation of Exodus 22:18 which reads, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”¹⁴ Calvin commented:

In these passages the punishment of those is approved who should in any respect violate the worship of God... The first passage denounces capital punishment upon witches; by which name Moses means enchantresses, or sorceresses, who devote themselves to the magic arts, either to injure persons by their fascinations, or to seek revelations from the devil; such as she whom Saul consulted... Since such illusions carry with them a wicked renunciation of God, no wonder that He would have them punished with death.¹⁵

This passage is often cited to exemplify Calvin’s harsh persecution of witches. However, a reading of this entry from a pastoral perspective reveals that Calvin’s focus was on the dishonor toward God, allegiance with Satan, and the misleading of other believers. Calvin’s ire was not upon the practice of witchcraft but rather upon the rebellion against God that witchcraft represented. As a faithful interpreter of Scripture, Calvin knew that the wages of sin is death.¹⁶ It was not Calvin who called for the death of witches but God.

¹² A survey of Calvin’s works confirmed that such wording was used consistently throughout.

¹³ John Calvin, *Commentary Upon the Acts of the Apostles* Vol. 2, Henry Beveridge, trans., (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1844), 108.

¹⁴ John Calvin, *Commentaries: The Four Last Books of Moses, A Harmony* Vol. 2, Charles William Bingham, trans., ed. (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1853), 90.

¹⁵ Calvin, *The Four Last Books of Moses*, 90.

¹⁶ Romans 6:23; John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*, John Owen, trans., ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 1849), 208.

Historians such as Trevor-Roper, and Robert W. Scribner described Calvin as a harsh persecutor of witchcraft practice. Scribner wrote that Calvin and his followers viewed Lutheranism as too lackadaisical in their stance on immorality; therefore, “Calvin and the reformed religion intensified to an even higher degree the cosmic struggle between the divine and the diabolical.”¹⁷ Davies also identified five characteristics of the Calvinist movement that primed the reformed Christians to react intensely to witchcraft, including the depravity of man and Jewish influences.¹⁸ According to Scribner and Davies, Calvin and his church focused on the battle against Satan and evil to a harmful degree.

Calvin on Punishment for Witchcraft

Calvin took a firm stance against the practice of witchcraft in his writings. However, he did not elevate sorcery above any other rebellion against God. Witches, sorcerers, or conjurers were to be brought under the disciplinary arm of the church like any other member caught up in sin. *Institutes* Book IV, chapter 12 explained Calvin’s understanding of church discipline. He wrote that “discipline forms the ligaments which connect the members together.”¹⁹ Furthermore, Calvin anticipated that discipline would not be embraced by all when he wrote:

But as some have such a hatred of discipline, as to abhor the very name, they should attend to the following consideration: That if no society, and even no house, though containing only a small family, can be preserved in a proper state without discipline, this

¹⁷ Robert W. Scribner, “The Reformation, Popular Magic, and the ‘Disenchantment of the World’”, (*The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 23, No. 3, Winter 1993), 483.

¹⁸ Davies identified five characteristics of Calvin and his church that primed them for harsh persecution of witches: the belief in the total depravity of man, the verbal inspiration of Scripture, Jewish influence, theocratic government, and the influence of the region surrounding Geneva. Davies, 9–12.

¹⁹ Calvin, “*Institutes* 4.11.1” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 2, (Edinburgh: The Calvin Translation Society, 1845), 411.

is far more necessary in the church, the state of which ought to be the most orderly of all.²⁰

Calvin viewed church discipline as the means by which the purity of the church was maintained and deemed it mandatory for the spiritual health of the church. Contrary to the depiction of Calvin as a harsh persecutor, he instructed that church discipline should always be carried out with gentleness.²¹ Paul Woolley observed that Calvin expressed extreme patience and was not quick to expel members from the church. However, he did not shy away from bringing swift punishment upon those who purposefully led others astray or caused harm.²²

Calvin instructed that church discipline be carried out according to the model presented in Scripture. He differentiated between corrective discipline, addressing sin with the intent to bring about repentance, and preventive discipline, guarding against corruption in the church. Calvin championed church discipline as a means of spiritual growth for the purpose of restoration and redemption, not solely aiming for excommunication.²³ Calvin placed the authority of church discipline in the hands of the church and its leaders and presented a systematic process by which church discipline should be practiced.

The structure and function of the a biblical church was detailed in *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, written in 1541 by Calvin and the Geneva church leadership. Calvin and his co-authors devoted the final portion of this document to the implementation of a Consistory, a designated group of church and civil leaders who would serve as a tribunal for the purpose of

²⁰ Calvin, “*Institutes* 4.11.1” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 2, 411.

²¹ “But it ought not to be forgotten, that the severity becoming the Church must be tempered with a spirit of gentleness.” Calvin, “*Institutes* 4.11.8” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 2, 416.

²² Paul Wooley, “Calvin and Toleration,” in *The Heritage of John Calvin: Heritage Hall Lectures 1960–1970*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1973), 137–57.

²³ Calvin, “*Institutes* 4.11.5–7” in *Institutes of the Christian Religion* Vol. 2, 413–16.

delivering church discipline. Matthew Barrett described this system as Calvin’s “reform program.”²⁴ Will Durant wrote of Calvin’s Consistory, “The difficulties of enforcement must have been extreme, for never in history had such strict virtue been required of a city.”²⁵ The Consistory was purposed to enforce Calvin’s valuable church discipline.

The directives in *Ecclesiastical Ordinances* detailed a biblical approach to church discipline which involved the voluntary presentation of a church member in suspicion of misconduct with the maximum penalty of excommunication.²⁶ Calvin and the church leaders included the statement that reminded the Consistory of their limited power: “All this must be done in such a way that the ministers have no civil jurisdiction nor use anything but the spiritual sword of the word of God... [the] civil power must remain unimpaired.”²⁷ The Consistory’s role in the church was limited to that of accountability for those who had voluntarily submitted themselves to the authority of the church. Therefore, the Consistory could influence the civil authorities in Geneva but could not order an execution.²⁸

²⁴ Matthew Barrett, *The Reformation as Renewal: Retrieving the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2023), 708.

²⁵ Though he disapproved of Calvin’s leadership and the Consistory’s actions, Durant included writings from Bernardino Chino, an Italian Protestant who found refuge in Geneva, and Valentin Andreae, a Lutheran minister from Würtemberg, who praised Geneva as “a glorious ornament of the Christian religion...”. Durant found it difficult to juxtapose such claims with his view of church discipline. Durant, 475–76.

²⁶ According to *Ecclesiastical Ordinances*, the consistory held the power to deny those in obstinate sin the rights to the ordinances of the church and church membership. The consistory did not have the power to take any civil action. John Calvin, “Calvin’s Genevan Ecclesiastical Ordinances, 1541,” *University of Oregon*, accessed February 20, 2024. <https://pages.uoregon.edu/sshoemak/323/texts/Calvin - Ecclesiastical Ordinances.htm>.

²⁷ John Calvin, “Calvin’s Genevan Ecclesiastical Ordinances, 1541.”

²⁸ Barrett noted that civil authorities in Geneva often held a seat as a part of the Consistory which blurred the lines of impartiality. Barrett, 708–709; However, Monter suggested that the civil magistrates preferred to leave cases of witchcraft to be judged by God. E. William Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland: The Borderlands during the Reformation*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976), 66.

Jeffrey R. Watt reported various cases in which Calvin's Consistory was presented with accusations of witchcraft. Watt observed that most of the cases presented to the Consistory involved the use of "white magic," such as attempts to heal people of various illnesses.²⁹ The Consistory was lenient in response to such cases, mostly involving temporary restrictions to church ordinances. Regarding more serious accusations of witchcraft, the Consistory approached these cases with a sense of skepticism and often dismissed these cases as defamation against the accused. In most occurrences, accusations of maleficent witchcraft were under the purview of Geneva's Small Council, a civil authority, not the Consistory, a church authority.³⁰ Unlike the Catholic equivalent to the Consistory, The Inquisition, the church in Geneva was less prone to taking accusations of "black magic" seriously.³¹

The Consistory's leniency towards accusations of witchcraft does not serve as a denial of the supernatural. On the contrary, Calvin and the Consistory acknowledged the possibility of collusion with the devil to commit heinous acts.³² Watt wrote, "To be sure, Calvin and his colleagues definitely believed it was possible to cast maleficent spells with the help of the devil, and they accordingly were not always dismissive when people expressed suspicious of

²⁹ Jeffrey R. Watt, "Calvin's Geneva Confronts Magic and Witchcraft: The Evidence from the Consistory," (*Journal of Early Modern History* Vol. 17 Issue 3, 2013), 215–44.

³⁰ Jeffrey R. Watt, *The Consistory and Social Discipline in Calvin's Geneva*, (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2020), 138–39.

³¹ Watt, "Calvin's Geneva Confronts Magic and Witchcraft," 216–17.

³² "It is true that Calvin... did attribute to the devil certain physical potency... But it is clear from his attitude on several important issues that he was skeptical of the reality of much witch-orthodoxy." Peter A. Benson, "Calvin and Witchcraft," (*The Reformed Theological Review* Vol. 34, No. 3, Sep-Dec 1975), 79.

witchcraft.”³³ The evidence of the Consistory’s actions suggests a skeptic response to accusations of sorcery but not a denial of the possibility of the supernatural.

Witchcraft Trials in 16th-Century Switzerland

Geneva was familiar with witch trials and executions prior to Calvin’s arrival. Jules Michelet reported that the Bishop of Geneva had five-hundred witches put to death over a three-month period in 1513.³⁴ After 1530, witch trials continued in Geneva yet resulted in less executions than surrounding regions. E. William Monter reported that 273 people were tried for practicing witchcraft between 1537 and 1662 with 48 resulting in death, a rate of 17.5%. Surrounding regions such as Zurich, Neuchâtel, and Luzern recorded rates of 33% to 67.5% of trials resulting in executions.³⁵ According to Monter, “nearly five out of every six people tried for witchcraft in Geneva escaped with their lives.”³⁶ The response to witchcraft in Geneva was not caused by the presence or actions of Calvin or the Consistory but was commensurate with the culture surrounding Geneva in the sixteenth century.³⁷

³³ Watt, “Calvin’s Geneva Confronts Magic and Witchcraft,” 229.

³⁴ Jules Michelet, *La Sorcieri: Nouvelle édition critique avec introduction, variantes et examen du manuscrit*, (PhD diss., Radboud University, Nijmegen, 1989), 24.

³⁵ E. William Monter, “Witchcraft in Geneva, 1537-1662,” (*The Journal of Modern History* Vol. 43, No. 2, June 1971), 187.

³⁶ Monter, “Witchcraft in Geneva,” 186.

³⁷ Watt, *The Consistory and Social Discipline in Calvin’s Geneva*; 138; Monter wrote that, contrary to popular scholarship, Calvinism may have been the reason for less harsh prosecution of witches in Geneva, as opposed to its catalyst. He wrote, “[Calvinism] may be a partial explanation for Geneva’s remarkably low rate of convictions: given any reasonable grounds for doubt, Genevan judges preferred to leave suspected witches to the judgment of God by expelling them, since they knew that human justice is always imperfect.” Monter, *Witchcraft in France and Switzerland*, 64–66; Gary K. Waite wrote, “Preoccupied as they were with the Reformation heresies and conflicts, the authorities showed great reluctance to deal with accusations of witchcraft.” Gary K. Waite, *Heresy, Magic, and Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2003), 134.

Three Traits Observed

Three characteristics can be observed through this survey of Calvin's approach to witchcraft. First, Calvin took the threat of Satan seriously as well as the possibility of the use of magic and sorcery. Second, Calvin viewed the use of divination as an affront to God and an association with Satan and evil, supernatural forces. Third, Calvin and the Consistory employed a reasonable dose of skepticism and reason when considering accusations of witchcraft. These three traits can also be observed in the writings and sermons of Puritan pastors in seventeenth century New England.

Puritan Pastors and Witchcraft

Many Puritan pastors shared the characteristics of strong moral convictions and fiery sermons. Another shared trait was their guard against collusion with Satan and the minions of evil. The Puritans desired to create a perfect Christian society guarded from the influence of sin and the devil.³⁸ The Puritans applied similar disciplinary regulations on their established communities to those of Calvin and the Genevan church. In a sense, states such as Massachusetts attempted to follow Calvin's model for the church on a larger scale. Therefore, the church leaders in Puritan culture took evil and sin seriously, an attribute that is reflected in their sermons and

³⁸ Emerson W. Baker, *A Storm of Witchcraft: The Salem Trials and the American Experience*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 8.

writings. This section will review respective works on witchcraft from prominent Puritan pastors Richard Baxter, Nathaniel Holmes, Cotton Mather, Increase Mather, and William Perkins.³⁹

The Threat of Evil

The Bible teaches that sin has very serious consequences and Puritans took this to heart, as did Calvin. Puritan pastors often referred to the “Law of Moses” in reference to the punishment of condemned witches.⁴⁰ Most often, this phrase represented the common Puritan interpretation of Exodus 22:18 which mirrored Calvin’s interpretation. Richard Perkins wrote in *A Discourse on the Damned Art of Witchcraft* (1608) that witches and sorcerers deserved death as punishment for their sin as do murderers and blasphemers.⁴¹ The condemnation of witches and wrongdoers to be executed serves to express the gravity of sin among Puritan leadership.

³⁹ Richard Baxter (1615–1691) received a mostly informal education and suffered chronic pain as a result of tuberculosis from the age of twenty-one. After preaching and serving in ministry for the better part of three decades, Baxter was expelled from the Church of England as a result of the Act of Uniformity in 1662. Baxter continued to write, his chief love, and preach, his past-time, throughout the end of his life. Increase Mather (1639–1723) was born in Massachusettes and became one of the most influential pastors of his generation. He championed strong preaching and congregational worship and served as the pastor of Second Church in Boston for over sixty years. Increase’s son, Cotton Mather (1663-1728), mastered Hebrew, Greek, and Latin at the age of seven and began education at Harvard at eleven. Cotton’s ministry focused on the study of Scripture and evangelism. Though generally regarded as the archetype of the intolerant Puritan who presided over the Salem Trials, Mather was not directly involved in the trials. William Perkins (1558–1602) gave up interest in mathematics and the occult upon his conversion during his time at Cambridge. A “Calvinist within a scholastic framework,” Perkins served as a preacher and lecturer at Great St. Andrew’s Church, Cambridge from 1584 until his death. Joel R. Beeke and Randall J. Pederson, *Meet the Puritans*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2006), 60–65, 419–35, 469–71; Nathaniel Holmes (1599–1678) was educated at Oxford and Exeter College and was known for being a strict Calvinist. Holmes preached at various churches from 1643 until being ejected from the Church of England under the Act of Uniformity. C. Matthew MacMahon, “Meet Nathaniel Holmes,” in *Demonology & Theology*, ed. Therese B. MacMahon, (Crossville, TN: Puritan Publications, 2014), 5–7.

⁴⁰ Richard Perkins, *A Discourse on the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, (Coconut Creek: Puritan Publications, 2012), 24.

⁴¹ Perkins, 161.

Puritan pastors viewed witchcraft as a real and prevalent sin. Those who practiced witchcraft were viewed with ire and disdain. Witchcraft was viewed as a sinful act in that it was an affront to God. According to Nathaniel Holmes, the use of witchcraft is a snare that traps the user and leads others into sin. Holmes wrote in *Demonology and Theology* (1650):

[Satan] being most malicious against God, does in everything he can oppose God. And therefore he also being a king or prince namely, of darkness, and god of the world, will have his oracle, invent his words and laws of the art of divination, *etc.*, which he communicates to his subjects, especially to his trusty tried ones, to put them in execution, to draw others to sin. And therefore, the apostle calls all superstitious worship, observations, actings and communion with them, *Diabolical*, 1 Corinthians 10:20–21.⁴²

Richard Baxter concurred in *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (1691) that all should commit “that they be not helpers and Servants to Devils, in Tempting and Destroying Souls... All that by wicked example and scandal, harden Men in Sin, they that Tempt People to Pride and Lust, and fleshly pleasures.”⁴³ Both Calvin and Puritan pastors viewed witchcraft as the intentional defiling of the self and others.

As with any other sin, the remedy is found in God’s grace. Perkins detailed a three-fold method of ridding oneself of witchcraft: First, examine yourself to determine why you were bewitched, express your faith in God, and endure your affliction as punishment for your sin.⁴⁴ Cotton Mather also viewed a commitment to God as the only remedy for those entangled in the sin of witchcraft. In his book *On Witchcraft* (1692), Mather instructed those who wished to rid themselves of the devil’s control to pray: “Satan, thy time with me is but short, Nay, thy time

⁴² Nathaniel Holmes, *Demonology and Theology*, (Crossville, TN: Puritan Publications, 2014), 38–39.

⁴³ Odd capitalization and spelling and all italic emphases are original to the source texts unless noted otherwise; Richard Baxter, *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, (Coppell, TX: Theophania Publishing, 2024), 17.

⁴⁴ Perkins, 196–197.

with me shall be no more; I am unutterably sorry that it has been so much; Depart from me thou Evil-Doer, that thou would'st have me to be an Evil Doer like thy self; I will now for ever keep the Commandments of that God, in whom I Live and Move, and have my Being!"⁴⁵ For pastors such as Mather and Perkins, the danger of sin and evil was ever-present, Satan was stalking at all times, and God's grace was the only countermeasure.

A Pact With the Devil

More than sin, Puritan pastors viewed witchcraft as a coercion with Satan himself. A person who practiced witchcraft did so not by their own ability but through the support of the power of the devil. Perkins wrote:

[It] is affirmed in the description, that witchcraft is practiced by the *assistance* of the devil, yet the more fully to distinguish it from all good, lawful and commendable arts, the master is able *by himself* to practice his art, to do things belonging to it, without the help of another. But in this wicked art it is otherwise. Here the work is done by the help of another, namely, *the devil*, who is a confederate with the witch.⁴⁶

Cotton Mather described such collusion, "Witchcraft seems to be the Skill of Applying the Plastic Spirit of the World, unto some unlawful purposes, by means of a Confederacy with Evil Spirits."⁴⁷ Baxter wrote, "it is the free will of Man that giveth the Devils their hurting power, and they can do us no harm not make us sin, without our own consent or yielding..."⁴⁸ In this way, the Puritan pastors echoed Calvin's belief that Satan can not seduce the unwilling. Therefore,

⁴⁵ Cotton Mather, *On Witchcraft: Being the Wonders of the Invisible World*, (Mount Vernon, NY: The Peter Pauper Press, 1974), 88.

⁴⁶ Perkins, 36.

⁴⁷ Mather, *On Witchcraft*, 131.

⁴⁸ Baxter, 8.

witchcraft was viewed as a deliberate choice on the behalf of the witch as opposed to something that befell them by chance or by the curse of another.⁴⁹

The understanding of witchcraft as an intentional offense to God intensified the threat in the collective Puritan mind. Witches were viewed as Satan's helpers who had chosen their position at the devil's side. Perkins wrote, "The ground of all the practices of Witchcraft is a league or covenant between the Witch and the Devil: wherein they do mutually bind themselves each to the other."⁵⁰ The sin of witchcraft was viewed by Puritan pastors and Calvin alike as a deliberate rebellion against God.

A Healthy Dose of Skepticism

Though they acknowledged the reality of sin and the presence of witchcraft in their day, these Puritan pastors were not overcome by irrationality. Cotton Mather and William Perkins acknowledged God's control over the universe and explained that no power in this world exists apart from the power of God. In a sense, God "permits" witchcraft.⁵¹ In *The Certainty of the World of Spirits*, Richard Baxter included various records of possessions, disembodied voices, and other unexplainable events to argue that, though some witches are proven to be false magicians, the supernatural exists and deserves attention.

⁴⁹ Perkins differentiated between those who knowingly made a pact with Satan in order to practice witchcraft and those who were using witchcraft with the intention of doing good. The latter, according to Perkins, led to the former. Therefore, neither could be viewed as innocent. Perkins, 38.

⁵⁰ Perkins, 33.

⁵¹ "If anyone thinks it is strange that Satan should in this sort oppose himself to the kingdom of God and maintain his own principality by such ungodly arts and exercises they must know that this and all other evil come to pass even by the will of God who has justly permitted the same." Perkins, 21.

In 1692, Increase Mather published *A Case of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits* as a response to the hysteria surrounding the trials in Salem. Mather's argument was a dose of reason in an onslaught of irrationality. The primary purpose of Mather's work was to challenge the use of spectral evidence which had become admissible in the Salem Witch Trials.⁵² His writing also represented a rationale that leaned more toward the reasonable than his contemporaries. Mather wrote, "It is better that a Guilty Person should be ABSOLVED, than that he should without sufficient ground of Conviction be condemned. I had rather judge a *Witch* to be an honest woman, than judge an honest woman to be a witch."⁵³ Increase Mather was less prone to sensationalism than his son, Cotton Mather, and represented a rational voice during the witch-craze of the late seventeenth century.

Increase Mather's *A Case of Conscience* is less damning than the writings of other pastors such as Richard Baxter and William Perkins which represent a movement of thought towards the extreme in response to cases of witchcraft accusations. In observation of the impact of Perkins's *A Discourse on the Damned Art of Witchcraft*, Peter Haining wrote that it represents "much of the thinking that could whip smoldering intolerance in simple minds into the raging fires of indiscriminate persecution."⁵⁴ A healthy dose of skepticism may have prevented the Salem Witch Trials from progressing as recorded. However, the evidence in the writings of Puritan pastors displays a presence of hysteria that was growing in the Puritan consciousness.

⁵² Spectral evidence is based on the dreams or visions of an accuser. Such evidence was considered admissible as proof of witchcraft during the course of the Salem Witch Trials.

⁵³ Increase Mather, *A Case of Conscience Concerning Evil Spirits*, (Boston: Benjamin Harris at the London Coffee-House, 1693), 67.

⁵⁴ Peter Haining, ed., *The Witchcraft Papers: Contemporary Records of the Witchcraft Hysteria in Essex 1560-1700*, (Secaucus: University Books, Inc., 1974), 142.

The Puritan Culture and Witchcraft

Both the culture in Switzerland in the sixteenth century and the seventeenth-century Puritan culture held magic and witchcraft as commonplace. Scribner wrote of Geneva in Calvin's era, "popular magic, sorcery or witchcraft were embedded in the texture of daily life."⁵⁵ Waite explained that use of magic was common in the fifteenth through seventeenth century though it is treated as folklore and superstition in modernity. In the colonial period, there was no question of whether or not magic was being used but rather what kind of magic. Genevans and Puritans alike would have considered love spells, blessings over crops, and cursed objects to be common.⁵⁶

The Threat of Witchcraft

In modern culture, witchcraft is considered a bygone element of archaic thought but it was quite real to the Puritan culture.⁵⁷ Puritans considered the supernatural to be reality—a looming threat. In the Puritan culture, witchcraft became an embodiment of that threat. Contrary to popular lore, Puritans championed scientific investigation and the practice of medicine, however, they also considered physical and mental maladies to be of supernatural causes.⁵⁸ In essence, the scientific was helpful but did not offer permanent solutions. The Puritans's reliance

⁵⁵ Robert W. Scribner, "Witchcraft and Judgment in Reformation Germany," (*History Today* April 1990), 12.

⁵⁶ Waite, 134.

⁵⁷ Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England*, (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 4.

⁵⁸ "In Puritan New England, all afflictions were seen ultimately as the result of supernatural forces. It was God's will that human should suffer for their sins. Thus, when ill, the sick were expected to think about their moral lapses or inadequacies, bear their afflictions with grace, learn the lesson that God was teaching them, and, if they recovered, walk a straighter path." Gevitz, 10.

on a supernatural benefactor, God, resulted in a strong belief in the opposite as well: a supernatural menace, Satan.

Samuel Parris, the pastor of the church in Salem before and during the trials, inundated his congregation with warnings of Satan's attack on the church and its members. Parris recorded his sermon preached on March 27, 1691, only a few months before accusations of witchcraft began to fly in Salem:

Our Lord Jesus Christ knows how many Devils there are in his Church, & who they are... Thus Christ in [John 6:70] calls Judas a Devil, for his great likeness to the Devil. One of you is a Devil i.e., a Devil for quality & disposition: not a Devil for Nature, for he was a man & but a Devil for likeness & operation... Ye are of your Father the Devil... There are such Devils in the Church: Not only sinners but notorious sinners; sinners more like to the Devil than others. So here in Christ's little Church... As in our text there was one among the twelve. And so in our Churches God knows how many Devils there are: whither 1, 2, 3, or 4 in 12. How many Devils, how many Saints. He that knows whom he has Chosen, [John 13:18], he also knows who they are that have not chosen him, but prefer farms & Merchandize above him, & above his ordinances. 2 Tim. 4:10.⁵⁹

Parris's messages were wrought with such warnings, likely attributing to the fear of evil forces in the cultural mindset. Preaching of this ilk likely fueled the hysteria that was reared in Salem in 1692.

A Partnership with Satan

As in the teaching of Calvin and Puritan pastors, magic and witchcraft were considered a pact with Satan in seventeenth-century Salem.⁶⁰ Accusations of witchcraft held damning social consequences in this strict Reformed society. The only condemnable evidence for the practice of

⁵⁹ Samuel Parris, *The Sermon Notebook of Samuel Parris, 1689-1694*, James F. Cooper, Jr. and Kenneth P. Minkema, eds., (Boston, MA: The Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1993), 194–96.

⁶⁰ Norman Gevitz, “‘The Devil Hath Laughed at the Physicians’: Witchcraft and Medical Practice in Seventeenth-Century New England,” (*Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 55, No. 1, 2000), 10.

witchcraft was for the accused to confess to consorting with Satan.⁶¹ The condemnable offense was not dabbling in supernatural arts but in making a pact with the devil, similar to Calvin's assessment of witchcraft.⁶² In the Puritan mind, the death penalty was given to people who had turned their back on God as opposed to persons who had merely cast spells or attempted to predict the future.

An Unhealthy Dose of Hysteria

Emerson Baker titled his book on the Salem Witch Trials, *A Storm of Witchcraft*, as a commentary on the situational circumstances in which the trials occurred. In utilization of a quote from Cotton Mather, Baker labeled the event as an "inextricable storm."⁶³ Baker described Salem in 1692 as "a unique convergence of conditions and events that produced what was by far the largest and most lethal witchcraft episode in American History."⁶⁴ Rodney Stark identified three conditions that were present in witch-hunts throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in America and Europe: an intense reaction to witchcraft, weak government, and religious conflict.⁶⁵ According to Stark's formula, Puritan theology impacted two out of the three identified conditions. Thus, Calvinist theology present in the Puritan culture certainly exacerbated the response to accusations of witchcraft practice in Salem. Unfortunately for Salem,

⁶¹ Gevitz, 10; Paul Boyer and Stephen Nissenbaum, *Salem Possessed: The Social Origins of Witchcraft*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974), 9–21; Karlsen, 4.

⁶² Baker, 8.

⁶³ Baker, 6.

⁶⁴ Baker, 6.

⁶⁵ Stark, 254–55.

Calvinist theology preached by Puritan pastors fueled the fire of the “witch-craze” in Massachusetts and beyond.⁶⁶

The Salem Witch Trials began with Samuel Parris’s suspicion that his daughters had been bewitched. Parris came to a conclusion that his daughters’s afflictions must have been the result of supernatural forces rather than a more reasonable explanation.⁶⁷ Like Parris, those involved in the trials did not approach accusations of witchcraft with appropriate amounts of doubt and logic. Calvin’s Consistory approached each witchcraft case reasonably, not dismissing the possibility of the supernatural but not assuming it either. The key difference between the trials in Salem and the Consistory, then, was the absence of a healthy dose of skepticism and the presence of an unhealthy dose of hysteria.

Conclusion

The same three traits are evident in Calvin’s response to witchcraft, the Puritan pastor’s approach, and the Puritan culture’s reaction: the threat of sin and evil, the denial of God, and varying levels of doubt. For the Puritan culture in the late seventeenth century, the level of mania surrounding the ominous danger of witchcraft proved to be the appropriate catalyst to ignite

⁶⁶ Trevor-Roper, 90–193.

⁶⁷ Baker, 14–17.

calamity that resulted in the loss of twenty-five human lives.⁶⁸ The panic in Salem was certainly aggravated by Puritan theology which was Calvinist in its leanings. However, it is unfair to place blame upon John Calvin or Calvinist theology for the tragedy in Salem, or to label John Calvin as a “witch-hunter.” Calvin was a pastor who believed that sin had consequences and held his congregation to a high standard. Throughout the history of the church, the role of disciplinarian-pastor has been labeled as despotic and hypercritical and Calvin is no exception to the trend. The cause of the Salem Witch Trials spawned from a combination of factors that includes religious conflict, but can not be blamed solely on Calvin and his theology.

⁶⁸ Baker, 7.

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