
Was The Salem Witchcraft Hysteria The Result Of Mainly Social Or Religious Factors?

Social, religious and other factors can be suggested to have caused the mass hysteria that occurred at the Salem Witchcraft Trials in 1692. Many people within the Salem village and town were accused of witchcraft, with a supposed 20 facing execution in a series of trials that were over just as quickly as they had begun. Historians have found difficulty in identifying a sole cause for the outbreak of such hysteria, with varying historical interpretations surfacing in the recent years. Many instances of pre-existent factionalism, challenges to Puritanism and the impact of a growing capitalist-based economy are just a selection of these interpretations. The Salem Witch Trials has been considered widely as one of Colonial America's most infamous legal cases, providing a historical narrative that portrays the potential danger of religious extremism, falsified accusations and isolationism. When interpreting whether social or religious pressures were more influential in the witchcraft trials, the Puritan religion can be proclaimed to impact significantly on social tensions within Salem and hence provide a greater argument for being primary to the hysteria.

Some examples of religious pressures within Salem during this period include the intentions of religious ministers, an upholding belief in the supernatural (the Devil included) and the impact of a restraining Puritan lifestyle. Some historians consider the witch trials as a kind of teenage rebellion against the authority of the Puritans, being within a largely restrictive religious society. The impact of the afflicted girls within the trials will be commented on later in this essay. Puritan secular leaders dominated New England politics in this period. A vast amount migrated due to finding God's work to be hampered in England, having to pursue it elsewhere. The Puritan religious group made their migration to colonial North America in their masses, in an attempt to construct a religious-based society. The sects' traditions and laws were extremely strict and individuals that opposed them were deemed sinful. The justification for these trials was formulated by a belief in the 'wrath of God' and likewise the presence of the Devil. The upholding belief in supernatural beings can be explained with the general population's devotion to the Puritan religion. Another religious pressure within Salem was the Church ministers themselves, as some historians have identified the trials as an attempt to deter the rest of society from anti-social behavior. This provides the extent to which Puritan religious bodies were willing to go in order to achieve religious unification within Salem. With the appointment of Samuel Parris in 1689, further religious tension grew due to the religious-standing of the minister. As an individual, Parris played a key role in the subsequent trials, which began with Betty (Samuel Parris' daughter) and cousin Abigail Williams accusing Tituba (an enslaved woman owned by Parris) of performing acts of witchcraft. Another group threatening to disrupt the religious order within Salem was the newly emerging merchant class on the East side of the village. The introduction of commercial capitalism and materialism opposed the traditional features of Puritanism, as the recent wealthier side of the community appeared less religious than their fellow settlers.

Both social and religious indications are shown when interpreting individuals within Salem such as George Burroughs, in being the only Puritan minister to be executed during the trials. Burroughs was hired as minister of Salem Village in 1680, quickly becoming a central figure in the on-going quarrels in the area over religion and money. Following his departure from this

role, Burroughs entered into financial conflict with the influential Putman family. The Putmans held a significant role in attempting to organize the geographical separation of Salem Village from its Town counterpart, determined to establish an independent identity for the community. Burroughs execution proved to be a sole case in the history of America for a body of his status, further presenting the severity of the tensions that amassed within the community. Prior to his execution, the former minister recited the prayer book, something generally considered impossible for an individual infiltrated by the Devil (him being labeled as the 'ringleader of the Salem witches'). A similar occurrence to this took place during the Rebecca Nurse execution as she stated 'God will save me'; further ridiculing the judicial procedures that took place during the Salem trials. Burroughs' influence within colonial warfare is another important element to consider, as Mary Beth Norton suggests that given the failure of attacks on the Native population, town officials attempted to shift the blame of their own inadequate defense of the frontier to supernatural causes, at the expense of the former Village minister. The impact of the Native Americans presence will be touched upon as another social pressure later in this essay. These are just a few instances of the various fractious relationships within the community that developed over many years, mostly in relation to property rights and church memberships.

Increasing social tensions within Salem Village also played a key role in the development of mass witchcraft hysteria. The social order of Salem was disrupted by the revoking of the Massachusetts Bay charter in 1689. Having been issued a new charter by the British government in 1691, restrictions upon the colony placed further restraints on the population. The accomplished status of some of the near 150 individuals accused of witchcraft practices, indicates the intense factionalism that was present within Salem during this period. In relation to socioeconomic pressures, the emerging commercial economy within New England and Salem in particular, caused resentments among some village families who were falling behind in a rapidly developing colonial society. Boyer and Nissenbaum adhere to this view by stating the witchcraft hysteria was a last-ditch attempt by the town's officials to drive back the insistent forces of economic change. Conflict in this instance came as a result of differing visions and directions Salem should pursue.

The witch-hunting phenomenon was present-place within Colonial New England throughout the 17th century, generally used as a method of removing outsiders and social outcasts from communities. This can be regarded in the case of the accused Tituba and Sara Osburn, further indicating the nature of the witchcraft victims in being that of social outcasts within the community. Another important element of the Salem witch trials to consider is the impact Native Americans and subsequent conflicts had on the population of Salem Village and Town. Frequent fears of attacks from Native Americans during this period created an atmosphere of tension and insecurity. Colonial warfare threatened to disrupt the Puritans' way of life.

It is apparent, given the sheer complexity that the Salem Witch Trials presents difficulties for historians when proposing specific historical narratives. The role of religious and social pressures in this infamous case, present the wider implications of a fractured colonial society in New England. It can be concluded that the various features of Puritanism and the shifting role of the church played a pivotal part in the unfolding of the events at Salem, in many cases more so than the social pressures at play. Aligned with this, a sole sense of boredom for the Puritan girls due to the lack of entertainment is another possible interpretation to consider for the cause of mass hysteria. Pre-existing factions between families within the agricultural village and its geographical neighbors in the town presents a direct correlation between the indicted and the accusers. The events at Salem present the complex nature of colonial New England during this

period, with mass hysteria being the explanation of a long series of inter-connected events and factors, religion and aspects of society being central components to this. Despite this, the role of the Puritan Church and religion was hugely influential in both religious and social terms and thus can be proclaimed to be key in the unfolding of the trials. The dwindling religious purpose of the Puritans, with the subsequent arrival of other religious sects in New England helped to create an atmosphere able to succumb to witchcraft hysteria. Both civil and religious experience clashed in this respect, as Salem provided a space in which the two worlds of commerce and religion were able to collide.

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