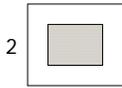


Witchcraft:

The First American

Conspiracy Theory



I. Witchcraft Fears as Conspiracy

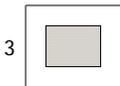
Theories

- ◆ The Evolution of European Witchcraft Fears
 - Basic definition of witchcraft in Euro-American courts: crimes committed by supernatural means.
 - In Europe, accused were usually women (esp. older, single women & midwives), social outcasts, disabled or disfigured, “difficult” or unconventional people.
 - ❖ Non-supernatural (political, economic & social conflicts), feuds & rivalries often involved.
 - In Middle Ages, witchcraft was seen usually as mere sorcery or maleficia: use of magic or spirits to commit a crime or attack an enemy.
 - Sorcery beliefs known in some form all through world & history, based on human need to explain what happens and feel control over world.
 - By 14th Century, European witchcraft beliefs had evolved into “diabolical witchcraft”: idea that witches worshipped Satan and conspired with him against Christianity.
 - ❖ Besides *maleficia*, common details included making

contracts and/or having sex with the Devil, orgies, desecration of religious objects, flying, shape-shifting, abusing and murdering children (often to use as ingredients in magic), & esp. the "sabbat."

– Clip from 1920s Danish documentary, *Haxan*

- ◆ What did witchcraft have in common with modern CTs?
 - They used "occult" (hidden) forces to account for bad or mysterious events, expressed a belief in pure, unmotivated evil, & imagined a secret network of evildoers.



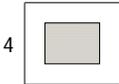
II. Magic & the Problem of Evil in

Western Religious History

- ◆ Problem of evil: Why are bad events and bad people in a world that seems so beautiful and good? If divine forces exist, why do they allow evil?
- ◆ Animism (nature spiritualized—Am. Indians, Africans) and polytheism (multiple, specialized gods—pre-Christian Europeans):
 - Under animism or polytheism, problem of evil was not really a problem: all things, forces, and gods have both good & evil sides; life & death, good & evil are flip sides of the same coin.
 - Example: Zeus & Hades are brothers, not God & Devil
 - No real notions of a separate Hell or a Devil.
 - Sorcery was relatively non-threatening as long as not used maliciously, because there were so many spirits and gods to go around. Good magic could exist.
- ◆ Monotheism (one all-powerful, completely good God -- Christianity, Judaism, Islam)
 - Problem of evil kicked in fiercely – why does the one

good God allow evil? Especially in Christianity, strong notions of Hell and a Devil develop.

- Incorporating an absolutely evil force also caused problems: what is its relationship with the all-powerful God? Answer was often "dualism," equally matched good & evil forces competing.
 - Christian Church struggled to stamp out dualist "heresies"/competitors such as Manichaeism, often by labeling them devil worship or witchcraft. Built C.T. model of witches.
 - Over centuries, as Christian beliefs were codified and rationalized, any invocations of supernatural forces not sanctioned by the Church came to be condemned as diabolical. However, folk magic was still practiced and supernatural beliefs were rampant, many *encouraged* and used by the Church.
- ◆ Protestant Reformation made things worse: elevated God even further, condemned even Catholic rituals as magical, emphasized need to *choose* Christianity. Satan loomed larger.

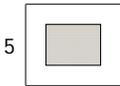


Protestantism, Magic, and the Devil

- ◆ Basic Protestant beliefs included:
- Salvation came only through God's grace. No human ritual could command God or borrow his power.
 - "Sola scriptura": Bible alone should be source of Christian belief & practice.
 - "Priesthood of all believers": Emphasis on individual understanding of faith.
 - Protestants attacked many aspects of Catholic worship, doctrine, culture: transubstantiation, indulgences, exorcism, cult of saints & Virgin Mary, traditional holidays like Christmas were all condemned as pagan, magical,

demeaning to God.

- ◆ Unfortunately, these pagan & magical elements had been a key to Catholic Church's success.
- ◆ Protestantism a much more anxious faith:
 - People had to be convinced to accept God when most would or could not be saved ("election").
 - World was Devil's playground, but most of the old protections did not work. All magic was Satanic.
 - Conclusion: Authorities needed to go after witches harder than ever. Luther agreed.



III. The "Witch-Craze" in Early

Modern Europe

- ◆ Salem trials came at tail end of more than three (14th-17th) centuries of hysteria that started in Central Europe and moved on to France then Scandinavia then British Isles then America before finishing in Eastern Europe. Tens of thousands died.
- ◆ This was after the Middle Ages, during the age of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and overseas expansion: art, literature, science, printing on the rise.
- ◆ Aspects of the Witch-Craze
 - Usual problems (disease, accidents, local tensions) set off scares, made worse by Protestant-Catholic competition & wars.
 - Judicial & religious authorities got involved, spreading and systematizing witch-hunts.
 - ❖ Machinery for policing heresy, such as the Inquisition, was invoked, allowing use of most extreme methods & punishments, fewest rights for the accused.
 - Burning was punishment for heresy (religious error).
 - ❖ Malleus Maleficarum ("Witch Hammer") published in

1486, endorsed by Pope: manual for detecting, prosecuting & killing witches. Defined nonbelief in witches as heresy.

- ❖ In England & its colonies, witch-hunting conducted by civil rather than religious authorities & witches were hung rather than burnt.
 - Unofficial “Witchfinder General,” Matthew Hopkins, operated during revolutionary 1640s.
- Authorities wanted confessions confirming the diabolical witchcraft model, with details and names of accomplices (crucial to the conspiracy model of diabolical witchcraft).
- Methods of interrogation: Testing, torture, standard list of leading questions.
- Women targeted more viciously than ever, encouraged by the “Witch Hammer”.
- Witch-hunting burnt out country by country beginning in 17th c., often after especially horrific incident: Loudun, France (1630); Mora, Sweden (1669).

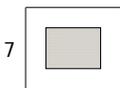
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IV. Witch-Hunting in Puritan New England

- ◆ Meet the Puritans
 - Puritans or “non-separating congregationalists” hoped to take over and purify both the Church of England and the English state.
 - ❖ Led by wealthy educated men: merchants, landowning gentry, lawyers, officials.
 - ❖ Massachusetts Bay colony to be a “city on a hill” (Gov. John Winthrop’s speech), an example of a godly society that would convert the world.
 - Puritans were hard-line Calvinist Protestants, but still lived in a “world of wonders.” God’s providence and other supernatural forces drove historical & personal events.
 - ❖ Folk magic (esp. countermagic) still widely practiced.

- Result: Everything that occurred was a test or a punishment. “God’s Controversy with N.E.”
- ◆ **Government and Society in Massachusetts Bay**
 - Approach: The godly in power, using power to serve God and His purposes.
 - ❖ Only certifiably saved could join the church & only church members could vote.
 - ❖ Churches were tax supported. Clergy could not hold office, but had great political influence.
 - ❖ Government very concerned about spiritual & moral state of the community. Authorities policed religious orthodoxy vigorously: expelling or executing heretics, banning “pagan” celebrations.
 - Land was centrally distributed and people were to live close together, near church.
- ◆ **Background tensions to the Salem witchcraft crisis:**
 - Religious back-sliding: decline in church membership, introduction of “Half-Way Covenant”
 - Land shortage, growing dispersion of settlement, divisions of towns and churches
 - English king’s recent attempt to take away the colony’s autonomy and identity: Dominion of New England, 1685-89; permanent loss of colony charter.
 - Indian raids due to King William’s War, memories of King Philip’s War.



IV. Witch-Hunting in Puritan New England (cont.)

- ◆ **The Salem Witch Trials, 1692:**
 - Witch trials held & people executed (such as widow Anne Hibbins) throughout New England’s history.
 - 175 arrested, 22 executed, encouraged by some clergy but not others. Unusual number of men accused & convicted.

- Tracked existing disputes: Salem Village (rural area) vs. Salem Town, supporters & opponents of Rev. Samuel Parris, family rivalries (Putnams vs. Porters).
- Aspects of the Salem witch hysteria
 - ❖ Started with possession-like illness of girls in Parris home & then spread; afflicted girls provided key testimony.
 - ❖ West Indian slave Tituba (known as a local "wise woman") was asked to make witch cakes to cure girls, but was then accused herself & confessed.
 - ❖ Many others never confessed: Giles Corey pressed to death for refusing to make a plea, following English law on use of torture. Many witnesses later recanted.
 - ❖ Trials made heavy use of "spectral evidence," *maleficia*, and signs. Unique details such Devil's book.
 - ❖ Spread out & became a regional problem. Ended when prominent people outside of Salem began to be accused.
- Increase & Cotton Mather, leaders of Puritan ministry, egged witch hunt on, then pulled back & gave Gov. William Phips an out: the devil had done it with *false* spectral evidence.
- Aftermath led to secularization of Massachusetts.

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V. Ironic Afterlife of Witchcraft & the Supernatural

- ◆ In late 17th & 18th c., with new recognition of natural causes among elites, authorities stopped & then cracked down on witch-hunting, but had tough time controlling popular beliefs. Result in Eastern Europe: vampire beliefs.
- ◆ Almost immediately after its legal end, witchcraft & supernatural became prominent themes in art & literature.
 - First in rationalistic, Enlightenment satires of religious superstition.
 - Then among successive waves of writers, artists, average

people seeking the exotic, emotional, mysterious to counteract soulless Enlightenment rationalism.

- Romantics (early 19th c.), renegade Victorians, free thinkers of early 20th century were fascinated by old mystical beliefs, created images & stories, dabbled in occult practices.
 - ❖ Literary productions of people like the Shelleys & their friends, Bram Stoker, etc., created modern horror genre & developed many concepts.
 - ❖ Stoker, poet W.B. Yeats & others were part of literary subculture at turn of century who held magical/pagan rituals: Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Aleister Crowley
- ◆ Bad/amateur anthropologists developed idea of witchcraft as a real, lost religion.
 - Charles G. Leland, *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1899); Margaret Murray, *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921); Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (1948).
 - ❖ Largely based on folklore & literal readings of the witch-trial confessions.
 - British occultist & folklorist Gerald Gardner “discovered” modern witchcraft/neo-paganism/“wicca” after WW2, drawing on Murray. Popularity took off in 1960s & 1970s.
 - Salem, Massachusetts now, finally, a center of “real” witchcraft.
- ◆ Witchcraft today a fairly harmless cultural/social stance: a feminist, environmentalist, nonthreatening alternative religion. Unfortunately, some do not get it.