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Cotton Mather Vindicated: The Salem Witch Trials

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New England in 1692 was in a tumult. Within a matter of weeks no less than 150 suspects had been charged with witchcraft and in the Massachusetts colony frightened men, women and children believed that the devil was on the loose. The epicentre of this wave of evil, which was to alienate children from their parents, churches from their pastors, servants from their masters and even wives from their husbands, was the small community of Salem several hours' ride on horseback from Boston.

Salem, though of very insignificant size, has received an over-proportioned importance in American 'popular history' as an example of how the Puritans strove to purge a town of its sin by burning its evil-doers.1 To a balanced Christian mind, Salem ought rather to be an example of how superstition and lack of spiritual insight can so blind secular authorities and social critics that they see the very men who were gifted by God to end the misguided witch-purging as being the instigators of it. Thus, Puritan giants of the faith such as Increase and Cotton Mather are held up to ridicule by politicians, historians and writers alike as the men who, in their twisted religious zeal, sent dozens of innocents to the scaffold. Arthur Miller, the self-styled moral reformer and author of The Crucible, a dramatized account of the Salem Witch Trials which the author claims is historical, sums up all the antipathy poured out against the Mathers by declaring that Cotton Mather incorporated 'absolute evil'.2 Elsewhere he speaks of Mather's doing his uttermost to have the witches hanged in spite of the opposition of the populace, saying, 'There is and will always be in my mind the spectacle of the great minister, and ideological authority behind the persecution, Cotton Mather, galloping up to the scaffold to beat back a crowd of villagers so moved by the towering dignity of the victims as to want to free them'.3

Many modern commentators, such as Arthur Miller and Sheila Huftel,4 believe that those accused of witchcraft in Salem were the poor, illiterate and oppressed who began to stand up for their rights only to be accused falsely of witchcraft by the wealthy Puritan businessmen who either employed them or let land to them. The trials were thus a typical example of class warfare where the 'bosses' suppressed the 'workers'.

Making fables out of the truth

This is a travesty of the truth for two reasons. Firstly, both the accused and the accusers included all classes from slaves to Harvard graduates and rich landowners. Secondly, if one has to generalise about the accused and the accusers it must be noted that Salem was rapidly developing into two separate communities. There were the 'villagers' and the 'townspeople' each group campaigning for a different form of local government. The 'villagers' eventually formed themselves into Salem Village which is now called Danvers, the 'townspeople' forming themselves into Salem Town, which still bears that name. The accusers were on the 'village' side and the accused on the 'town' side. It is interesting to note that when one compares the total education of the accusers with that of the accused one sees how up-side-down Miller's and Huftel's theory is. On the whole, the accusers' education was lower than that of the accused. This was because most of the accusers were either women (of various classes), children or slaves.

Cotton Mather, the hero of Salem, made chief culprit

Cotton Mather is a man whose reputation has been smeared for three hundred years by the abuse and harsh criticism of a legion of know-all antagonists. A closer look at his character will show how ill-founded such criticism is. Mather was still in his twenties in 1692 and assisted his father, Increase Mather, aged fifty-three in his Boston church – miles away from Salem. Young as he was, Cotton Mather had a great deal of experience with witches. He had studied a huge amount of material concerning witchcraft in Europe and the North American colonies and was particularly influenced by reports from Sweden where prayer, counselling and intense care had led to cures. At 25 years of age Cotton felt that he now knew enough about witchcraft on the theoretical side and felt called of God to start a practical ministry to those involved. His first 'patients' were four children who had come under the influence of an elderly Irish Roman Catholic woman who openly professed to be in league with the devil. Under the 'spells' of the wicked woman the children became very violent, went into terrible fits and lost the use of their senses. All four children suffered from inexplicable and agonising pains. The Irishwoman claimed defiantly to be a witch even when threatened with the death penalty. She was subsequently condemned to death but shortly before her execution she boasted that the four children would continue to be bewitched as the devil had other helpers to replace her.

Mather discussed the children's cases with them and prayed with them about their condition. As they were obviously undernourished, he arranged for them to be put on a special diet and appealed to the whole church to support him in prayer and help him care for the children. The youngest children soon became normal again but the eldest daughter was in too bad a condition for her widower father to look after her so Mather took her to live with his own family. The girl was given good books to read by Puritan and Quaker authors but also supplied with books of humorous stories. The girl, too, was speedily cured and Mather then opened his home to at least six other people who were said to be in league with the devil or under an evil

spell. In every single case Cotton Mather was completely successful in assisting those in his care to return to a normal healthy life both in body and mind.

Mather's reasons for witchcraft superstitions

Mather openly gave solid reasons why superstition and witchcraft were spreading in the New England communities. First, he attacked the poor education given in his day, especially that of women and slaves who were involved the most in cases of witchcraft. He drew up curricula for their education and even wrote textbooks for female pupils and handbooks for their teachers. All in all, Cotton Mather wrote some 450 books to combat ignorance and unbelief in this way. Striving to educate the community almost cost Mather his life. The smallpox took its toll of the Massachusetts colony and Mather started a rigorous inoculation campaign. This caused a great uproar amongst the superstitious in the colony. Word went round that as cow-pox serum was used in the inoculation, those inoculated would grow horns and start to moo. Thus, instead of thanking Mather for seeking only their health and general welfare, the mob thought Mather was trying to shape them into a race of mutants and the cry went up that Mather must be lynched.

Mather was also strong in his criticism of the churches in the colony. He felt they were becoming slack in their responsibility to call 'officers appointed by the Lord Jesus Christ' to shepherd them. His advice went unheeded and by 1692 one church, for instance, had given the pastorate to an ex-merchant who had gone bankrupt and was looking for a comfortable job. This man turned out to be a real burden to his church and was one of the chief accusers in the trials. Another church, apparently impressed by the great strength and loud voice of a man, allowed him to pastor them although he was not ordained by any church body and had a history of violence and immorality behind him of which he boasted rather than repented. This man was accused of crimes committed as a witch and subsequently executed.

Indirectly and tragically, it was the tolerance of the Mathers which paved the way for the low spiritual state of many a church. Increase, with Cotton's support, had introduced what came to be known as the Half Way Covenant into the churches. This system allowed for 'people of good will' to become church members without any true profession of faith. The outcome was that churches became more and more social bodies rather than the local communion of the saints as signs of conversion were no longer expected of members. By 1692 the tares had spread so rapidly amongst the wheat in the churches that the wheat was being choked.

Mather taught that worldly powers were ordained of God and he reprimanded his hearers for their lack of respect to those who governed the colony. Mather was not campaigning for an uncritical acceptance of Crown rule but he complained about a people who would not be ruled at all.

Before one can attempt to understand the Salem Witch Trials one must realise that the whole colony was in a state of rebellion because of the instability of the Stuart cause and the impending Glorious Revolution. The colonialists refused to accept the Governor, Edmund Andros, because of his links with the old regime and his close allegiance to the Church of England. Thus, the colonialists sent Increase Mather to England to bargain for a new charter. They hoped for semi-independence from the Crown and the right to make their own laws. Increase was away for four years before returning in the late spring of 1692 with the new, liberal charter in his pocket and accompanied by Sir William Phips, the new Governor, appointed by William and Mary. The document that Increase Mather had worked out with both their majesties gave the colonists a freedom that Englishmen in England could only dream of. The penal code, however, was not repealed and the colony was still bound to try suspected criminals, including witches, according to English law. This did not suffice to calm down the populace, particularly because Phips, as soon as he arrived in Massachusetts, was called away to deal with troubles between settlers and the Indians and left the government in the hands of untried and partly unsuitable administrators.

The mistakes of the Mathers' critics

Critics of the Mathers make two major mistakes in judging their supposed part in the Salem Witch Trials. They emphasise Increase's alleged co-responsibility with his son, a historical impossibility as Increase was in England when accusations of witchcraft were raised and the first imprisonments occurred. They also emphasise that it was specifically New England Puritan influence that damned the accused. Again, this is historically false. The Salem Witch Trials were conducted by an Oyer and Terminer Crown Court holding the legal powers of the day and an English lawyer, Mr Newton was present to act as King's attorney. Dalton's Justice, which was the accepted legal guide, was used as a basis for examining both the accusers and the accused. The English law of the day was quite complicated in its relation to witchcraft. Professing to be a witch was not ipso facto a crime. If witches were brought to court, it was because they were accused of committing crimes through the agency of witchcraft. Thus, renegade Pastor Burroughs was arrested for allegedly boasting that he had murdered one of his previous wives by means of wizardry. He was also charged with brutality against other women. Torture was allowed by English law in order to gain confessions. John Proctor, one of the accused, wrote to Increase Mather complaining that three of the defendants, including his own son, had been tortured. Giles Cory, an old man, who refused to plead, was tortured to death. Cory had accepted this brutal death to ensure that his sons would inherit his farm. If he had pleaded 'not guilty' yet was found guilty, his property would have been confiscated by the court. This all sounds brutal and inhumane but it was the law of the land at the time. It had nothing to do with the New England Puritans and certainly nothing to do with the Mathers. On the contrary, it was the product of a regime, on the whole, opposed to Puritanism, and had the courts listened to

Cotton Mather from the start, there would certainly have been fewer hangings if any at all. Indeed, because of its Puritan inheritance, New England can be shown to have had far fewer witch trials than European communities of a similar size, during the same period. There were also far more reprieves than condemnations – even in the case of the Salem Witch Trials where legal blunder after blunder was made.

Where Mather laid the true blame

Mather blamed the increase in superstition in the colony on 'the lamentable want of regeneration in the rising generation'. He thus used all the influence he had to make sure that true men of God were called as pastors. This, however, made Mather very unpopular amongst his ministerial brethren who had a lower view of regeneration. A number of Mather's clerical colleagues looked upon him as over-pedantic because of his strict adherence to sound Reformed doctrine. Nothing daunting, Mather started to form educational projects and youth clubs throughout the colony to care for the physical, mental and spiritual needs of young people according to Scriptural principles. Benjamin Franklin was one of the youths who came into Mather's care and when he reached high office, he testified to the teaching of Mather which helped him to remain humble whilst carried along on the wings of fame.

Cotton Mather had little to do with the Court proceedings

Readers will begin to suspect that even Cotton Mather had very little to do with the Salem court proceedings. This is quite true. Arthur Miller and his witch-hunting play-wrights are myth-wrights. Neither Increase nor Cotton had any ecclesiastical or legal jurisdiction in Salem nor were they ever present at the Salem Witch Trials although Cotton did visit Proctor, one of the accused, when he was imprisoned for a short time in Boston. He may also have visited Burroughs, the self-styled but unordained minister, when he was imprisoned in Salem. The truth is, that though Cotton Mather protested strongly against the methods of the court and his father joined with him in these protests when he returned from England, their protests, whilst the governor was absent, fell on deaf ears.

The Mathers felt that the law was being abused

The Mathers' main objection was that the secular court was trying the accused on evidence outside the realm of the law. The witch-hunting apparently started when children complained that they were being tormented by the spectres of people who, to a great extent, were seen as respectable citizens and sound Christians. Vice-Governor Stoughton, who led the judges, was quite at a loss in dealing with the situation. He maintained that good people could never be used by the devil to harm other people. Thus, if anyone were tormented by a spectral vision, the person appearing in that vision must be in league with the devil. Increase pointed out that such a view was contrary to Scripture and common-sense and

spectral evidence could in no way be used as evidence in court. Furthermore, the court believed that asking suspects to recite the Lord's Prayer would show who was innocent and who was guilty. They naively believed that innocent people would recite the Lord's prayer without faltering, but guilty people could not. Cotton protested strongly against such a superstitious practice but the court closed their ears to his protests. Thus, the Mathers had to stand back and see old ladies being 'ducked', to gain confessions, old men being crushed to death if they refused to plead and women being accused of witchcraft merely because they had malformed breasts.

Cotton Mather was the first to protest at the arrests

When Cotton Mather heard of the first arrests, he went straight to the court and requested permission to care for the accused, pointing out his previous success. The court refused his application. This led A. P. Marvin in his book The Life and Times of Cotton Mather to say that if Mather's methods had been 'studied and imitated, it is possible, if not probable, that the whole awful tragedy of blood, in 1692, would have been averted'.5 Later, Increase Mather prepared a pamphlet entitled Cases of Conscience for general distribution. In it he argued that evidence against witches should be obtained in exactly the same way as evidence in the case of those charged with other crimes. Torture and duckings should be abolished and the evidence of single accusers rejected. Only evidence substantiated by two witnesses at least should be accepted. Increase actually wrote, 'It were better that ten suspected witches should escape, than that one innocent person should be condemned'.

Again, the question must be asked, if this is all true – and the records are still there to vouch for the validity of the above statements – how could it be possible for Increase and Cotton Mather to be castigated by generations as the perpetrators of the very abuses of law which they strove to abolish? The records come to our assistance here, too, and show us how the truth has been distorted by enemies of the Gospel.

Distortions of the truth shown in the misuse of records

In September, 1692, the trial judges were required to write an interim report for the Governor which was to be sent to England. The judges by this time were very sensitive to the fact that public opinion was moving against them and they decided to choose someone to write the report who had played no part in the court proceedings. Their choice fell on Cotton Mather who agreed to the undertaking. He felt the task might help him to exert the influence on the court for the good of the accused that had been denied him. Cotton thus chose five cases out of over a hundred that had been dealt with by the court. These were the few cases in which, in Cotton's opinion, crimes had been detected by convincing and lawful means. In this way Cotton strove to show the court how they should have behaved in the other cases and how little respect he had for their findings in

general. So far, so good.

Now the Mathers had made many enemies amongst free-thinkers, sceptics and Deists in the colony and this report fell into the hands of a Boston weaver named Robert Calf who detested the Puritan faith. Without consulting either the court or Mather, Calf combined Cotton's work with imaginary, and quite scandalous, accounts of his own and published the whole under the name of Cotton Mather. Calf, who used the name 'Calef'6 in his writings, even went to the extreme of claiming that both Increase and Cotton had behaved immorally with one of the female victims of witchcraft in their care, in full view of a number of on-lookers.

Cotton had produced a scientific work called Wonders of the Invisible World so Calf, wishing to bring Cotton further into disrepute, produced a 'sequel' to the volume calling it More Wonders of the Invisible World. In the work, he disclosed hitherto 'unpublished' sayings of Cotton which Calf, of course, had merely made up. Calf was well-known as a public liar and no one took his scandalous works seriously at the time. The rogue eventually showed signs of repentance and wrote a contrite letter which stopped Mather from taking the matter to court. Calf also wrote libellously against another minister, Samuel Willard, whose friends urged him to sue Calf. Willard replied that the only adequate way to deal with his adversary was according to Proverbs 26:4 which reads, 'Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest thou also be like unto him'. When one reads the works of many a modern critic of the Mathers, it is clear that they are using Calf as he is the only source for many of the adverse statements that they repeat as being 'substantially true'7. Arthur Miller, for instance, teaches that the records prove that Cotton Mather beat back the crowds who wanted to free the witches. Calf is the only source for this piece of disinformation. This is slander indeed.

The growth of Deism and Arianism in North America

By the nineteenth century Deistic and Unitarian churches had become relatively numerous in the colony and their ministers looked on the Reformed, Calvinistic faith of the Puritan fathers as absolute evil. These false witnesses began to systematically rewrite the history of the New England churches. They were very careful to fan the flames of controversy against Christian denominations by alluding to Calf's works as the standard books on the Puritan divines. In 1831, a pastor of the Unitarian Church in Salem, Charles W. Upham, gave a series of lectures on the witch trials and eventually published his notes under the title Salem Witchcraft. Knowing that Cotton Mather detested Unitarianism, Upham severely criticised the Puritan and gave him the full blame for the trials. The 'proof' he gives is highly speculative and of a very strange logic. It is impossible to believe, he argued, that Mather, who put his nose into everything and tried to manage everything, did not take part in the trials. It can thus be safely taken for granted that he was there. As we must suppose that Mather was there and yet he did not stop the trials, he must have not only condoned them but

also encouraged them. Thus, Upham can conclude that Cotton Mather was ‘the leading champion of the judges’8.

Upham’s parody revealed

Upham’s portrayal of Mather, which leans heavily on Calf’s, is a parody of the man. One of the reasons why Upham gives Cotton Mather the full blame for the trials is that the entire government of the colony and the judges were his ‘creatures’. This does not fit the facts. Increase Mather had far more authority and influence than his son who was merely his assistant yet of the 28 Councillors in office in 1692 only three were members of the Mathers’ church. Of these three, one, Governor Phips was away fighting the Indians throughout most of the trials. Another member, judge John Richards, fought against his pastor’s views and almost split the church in his fierce opposition to both Increase and Cotton. There are letters extant in which the Mathers urge Richards to stop judging the accused on the grounds of spectral evidence but Richards refused to be influenced by his pastors thus showing that he was certainly not their ‘creature’. Even if the Governor himself were Cotton Mather’s ‘creature’, this would only have spoken well for Cotton as when Phips returned from fighting on the border to take an active part in the trials, he quickly gave the judges a piece of his mind and reprieved all those impeached. His action, however, came too late to save 20 of the accused from the scaffold, being crushed to death or dying in prison awaiting the gallows. Thus, fine Christians such as Rebecca Nurse and John Proctor were hanged along with obvious criminals. Proctor’s last words were to ask Cotton Mather as his ‘comforter and friend’ to pray with him and he died asking God to forgive his false-accusers.9

The Salem Witch Trials, were, on the whole, a travesty of justice. They were conducted by men who were completely out of their depths. They are a constant reminder to all that when God’s Word is not respected and superstition and worldly wisdom are used as substitutes, any evil might happen.

1 There were no burnings in Salem. The numerous novels and films dealing with these ‘burnings’ are pure flights of the imagination.

2 The Theatre Essays of Arthur Miller, N.Y., 1978, p. 156 ff.

3 Theatre Essays, page 157.

4 Sheila Huftel in her Arthur Miller: The Burning Glass, N.Y., 1965.

5 Boston, 1892, p.127.

6 Cotton Mather has often been criticised for calling Calf by that name rather than Calef. Calf was, however, his real name. It seems that when Calf read the proofs of his ‘report’, he discovered that his name had been

spelt incorrectly as ‘Calef’. Calf kept the new name as a pen-name for obvious reasons. His wife, however, continued to sign herself ‘Calf’.

7 Miller’s words.

8 See Historical Magazine, Sept. 1869, vol. VI, Second Series, especially p. 161.

9 See North American Review, No CCXIII, April, 1869, pp. 385-6 for an account of Proctor’s brave death.

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