HOW REASON DEFEATED UNREASON IN 1692

On the 19th of April, 1692, Bridget Bishop, accused of witchcraft by “afflicted” girls – two of whom were 17 and another 19 years old, there was this exchange between the 60-year-old Bishop and the judges:

Q: Why you seem to act witchcraft before us, by the motion of your body, which seems to have influence upon the afflicted?
A: I know nothing of it. I am innocent to a Witch. I know not what a Witch is.
Q: How do you know then that you are not a witch?
A: I do not know what you say.
Q: How can you know, you are no Witch, & yet not know what a Witch is?
A: I am clear: if I were any such person you should know it.

By the time of Bishop’s trial on June 2nd during the deepening “hysteria” of the Salem Witchcraft affair, “there was little occasion to prove the witchcraft, this being evident and notorious” according to Cotton Mather. Additional “evidence” against Bishop were a variety of tales of events, many occurring years earlier, of adult men and others encountering the apparition of Bishop, of people falling sick or of animals behaving strangely or dying sometime after an encounter with Bishop. Another piece of “evidence” was of Bishop’s having a “devil’s teat,” or small abnormality of the skin near her anus that had been found during a careful examination of her the day before her trial.

Bridget Bishop was the first to be hanged as a witch, on June 10th. Two others had also been indicted but did not go immediately to trial. The court was then adjourned while counsel was sought from New England’s most prominent clerics as to how to proceed.

The need for clerical advice doubtless had something to do with the fact that, prior to this, those executed for witchcraft had generally confessed to the crime whereas Bishop went to the gallows insisting on her innocence. In addition, Bishop had been indicted, tried, and convicted specifically “for useing practis- ing and exercisein[g] [on the Nineteenth day of April] last past and divers other dayes and times [before and after certain acts of] Witchcraft in and upon the bodys of Abigail Williams , Ann puttnam J[un'r] Mercy Lewis , Mary Walcott and Elizabeth Hubbard of Salem village singlewomen, whereby their bodys were hurt, afflicted pined, consu[med] Wasted and tormented.” In other words, Bridget Bishop was hanged on the strength of the performance of the “afflicted” girls at her interrogation in April as well as on the demonstrably false charge that these “afflicted” appeared to be anything but normal when not having their courtroom fits.

“Spectral evidence” was the sticking point. Without this, said Nathaniel Saltonstall, one of the judges who subsequently resigned in protest, Bridget Bishop was executed for “little more than wearing scarlet, countenancing shovel board, and getting herself talked about, all offenses, but hardly capital offenses.”

When the clerics’ recommendations came back as “The Return of Several Ministers,” written by Cotton Mather, the 6th point was that: “Presumptions whereupon persons may be committed, and, much more, convictions whereupon persons may be condemned as guilty of witchcrafts, ought certainly to be more considerable than barely the accused person’s being represented by a specter unto the afflicted; inasmuch as it is an undoubted and notorious thing, that a demon may, by God’s permission, appear, even to ill purposes, in the shape of an innocent, yea, and a virtuous man. Nor can we esteem alterations made in the sufferers, by a look or touch of the accused, to be an infallible evidence of guilt, but frequently liable to be abused by the Devil’s legerdemains.”

But as historian Thomas Hutchinson, who was also governor of Massachusetts from 1758-1774, observed, the context was such that “spectral evidence” was not discredited, much less clearly opposed or discouraged. The result, according to Hutchinson, was that “the prosecutions went on with more vigor than
It is difficult for us to imagine, in the 21st Century, courts of law consulting ministers as to how best to proceed in prosecuting the crime of collusion with the devil. But this is how theocracy works. And we must remember that one of the most important early American colonies, the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was a theocracy.

Freethought Day, October 12th, commemorates the action of Governor William Phips in stopping the Salem Witchcraft trials on or about that date in 1692 when he sent a letter to the Privy Council of William and Mary. Phips referred pointedly to “what danger some of their innocent subjects might be exposed to, if the evidence of the afflicted persons only did previle either to the committing or trying of any of them.” When legal proceedings resumed in January of 1693, “spectral evidence” was discounted and there were no more hangings of “witches.”

Importantly, Phips’ action was taken with the cover of ecclesiastical approval as Increase Mather, Cotton Mather’s father, had decried “spectral evidence” as being unreliable only 9 days earlier, saying: “It were were better that Ten Suspected Witches should escape, than that one Innocent Person should be Condemned.” Three years later, one Thomas Maule went further, saying “it were better that one hundred Witches should live, than that one person be put to death for a witch, which is not a Witch.”

But the damage had been done, not just to “spectral evidence,” but to the theology behind it and, ultimately, to the idea of theocracy. The Salem Witchcraft Trials became a dramatic example in the Western Hemisphere, and an enduring symbol, of the danger of state-church entanglement. It is an important lesson of history that should not be lost on anyone, even today.

“God as now generally conceived of is only the last witch.”
- Samuel Butler