



## 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 using practi-seing and exercisein[g] [on the Nyneteenth day of April] last past and divers other dayes and times [before and after certain acts of] Witchcraft in and upon the bodyes of Abigial Williams , Ann puttnam J[un'r] Mercy Lewis , Mary Walcott and Elizabeth Hubbard of Salem village singlewomen, whereby their bodyes 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

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before."

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 prevail 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 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.

**YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED, APPRECIATED, AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!! (YOUR MONEY IS BEWITCHED! GIVE IT TO THE NTCOF TO DE-DEMONIZE!)**

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:  
"BE GOOD, BE GRATEFUL"**

**>>> Sunday, November 7th, 2012 <<<  
SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT  
SE CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS**

**All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar (yes, website has now been updated thanks to Sarah and Rusty Nejd!), or through our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: [www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought](http://www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought) - **JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!****

**Social Luncheon:** Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Golden Corral Buffet and Grill in Grapevine, located just across from the Grapevine Mills Mall, at 2605 E. Grapevine Mills Circle, phone (972) 874-7900. To reach Golden Corral from the Sheraton, cross over the freeway and make a left onto John W. Carpenter Freeway (114) going west. Then take the first exit RIGHT onto International Parkway (121), then Grapevine Mills Parkway exit. Turn LEFT on Stars and Stripes Way, continuing on to E. Grapevine Mills Circle.

**Freethought Salon:** Get together to discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest to Freethinkers. Most Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton Vineyard in Grapevine; see the meetup site!

**Game Night:** The regular game night crew meets nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

**Secular Singles:** Freethinkers have met their life-partners with whom they have begun families through the Secular Singles group. Check the meetup site for the next date, time and location!

**"God as now generally conceived of is only the last witch."  
- Samuel Butler**



**DFWCOR**

Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason

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