THE SALEM WITCH TRIALS

A Literary and Historical Study of
Puritanism in 1692 as a Way of
Evaluating Recent Scandals in the
Electronic Church in the U. S. A.

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In the United States this year there was a major religious scandal. It took place in the South and involved the Electronic Church—a term which includes several kinds of religious bodies, all noted for their fundamentalist beliefs, their right-wing politics, and especially their use of the media to collect money to build rather impressive empires. The scandal touched four branches of this Church. In one case a national TV preacher was dispossessed for a sexual liaison with a naive follower. This gospel minister then implicated a competing one for deliberately plotting to topple his (the first minister's) enterprise. A third minister took over the first empire, only to be accused of misusing substantial funds donated by followers, supposedly for the relief of the poor in South Africa. And a fourth was criticized for threatening people with his own death if they did not come up with several million to keep his hospitals going through the year.

This series of events gives us an important context for examining the relationship between religion and power in any culture. One is tempted at a time like this to simply lambast the PTL or the Moral Majority—two familiar branches of the Electronic Chruch—for their mistakes or excesses, but that may be counterproductive. What is possible and probably more beneficial is for a teacher in a classroom to use this moment in history to put these events into some kind of historical framework and then work from there to a broad interpretation of the present events. One of the most interesting episodes
in U. S. history is the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, not only because here religion and power collide dramatically, but because the interpretation of this event demands so much of us intellectually.

What a tremendous experience it could be for students if a teacher is willing to take a class back in time to an event like Salem where, as the historian Edward Carr says, we can examine first the "givens" of an episode, and then try to put together the different pieces of an historical puzzle about which we are not so sure, always remembering that we interpret the past from the viewpoint of the present. This is what this paper attempts; using the perspectives of both historians and literary figures who describe the Salem Trials, we want to bring them together into some kind of meaningful whole, and then make some applications to the Electronic Church—or at least its leaders—as a way of better understanding our present world. Emily Dickinson says:

Witchcraft was hung, in History
But History and I
Find all the Witchcraft that we need
Around us, every Day

That in a nutshell is our task—to look back at the Witch Trials of Salem, and then see if they can help us today.

So what is the raw material of Salem? What we know is that early in 1692 a group of women went into the forest and participated in some kind of mysteriously dark rite. Later, they confessed to the deed, but then began to accuse other townspeople of making pacts with the Devil. In the early summer a court was convened, with Deputy-Governor
William Stoughton as chief justice. By late fall twenty people had been convicted of witchcraft and executed, and 150 others were imprisoned—extraordinary figures for a village of only 228 people. Because of reactions from religious and non-religious individuals, Governor Phips, returning from the French and Indian Wars up north, stopped the proceedings and freed the prisoners by year's end. On the surface, this is what happened at Salem, but what happened to cause all this, and why, is the task of our study.

After setting up the problem, the first step for the teacher with the class is to explain witchcraft. One good approach here is to use an article by H. R. Trevor-Roper entitled "The Persecution of Witches" (1959). Beginning in the Middle Ages, he explains in graphic detail many of the grotesque practices of witches—the sucking of toads, exhuming of bodies, intercourse with incubi and succubi, as well as methods used by the authorities to test for such creatures, many of which were contained in a standard handbook entitled Malleus Maleficarum. Once a witch was detected, there followed the concerted effort to elicit confessions, by stretching, jerking, or twisting parts of the body, and more often than not the individual who confessed pointed out other witches through what came to be known as "special" or "spectral" evidence. But most important, says Trevor-Roper, is that the persecution of witchcraft was not really medieval, a product of the Dark Ages, but an outgrowth of the late 15th Century Inquisition of the Roman Catholic Church.
Witchcraft as a systematic cult was really invented by the inquisitors to persecute heresy, and in this context the craze spread throughout Europe. Humanists attacked it as "an illusion of minds distorted by poverty and undernourishment," but these lay intellectuals were no match for the clergy, who prevailed at sacrifício dell' intelletto (the sacrifice of the intellect) because of what they called la trahison des clercs (the treason of the intellectuals). In Germany the devout Lutheran Benedict Carpzov, a retired jurist, wrote a handbook on witches, called the Malleus of Protestantism. And John Calvin introduced the persecution of witchcraft into Geneva, preaching to the Elect:

... The Bible teaches that there are witches and that they must be slain. God expressly commands that all witches and enchantresses shall be put to death, and this law of God is universal law.

A new church, therefore, more universal than Catholicism or Protestantism, came into being, and "all the forces of tradition, custom, discipline, and vested interests joined to sustain it." From England, where persecution reached its height in the 1640s, witchcraft passed to North America through the Puritans.

In addition to this historical account, the students ought to read Ester Forbes' "Mirror For Witches" (1928), a story about Doll Bilby, a witch at the time. Here literature, through its viewpoint and language reflecting the period, helps us identify psychologically with a pre-industrial age, where the Devil is real and women
especially are victimized by its patriarchal ways. Born abroad of a witch and warlock, Doll was picked up by a sea captain named Bilby, who brought her to America. Here she is rejected by Mrs. Bilby who blames Doll for blasting the child in her womb. Later, Capt. Bilby dies and Doll is left with her hostile step-mother. A neighbor, Titus Thumb, wants to marry Doll and his minister father encourages the union to acquire some of the Bibly estate. But Doll fears Titus' religion, and when he woos her she precipitates a series of preternatural events. In the end Doll, having taken a demon lover, is accused of witchcraft, and in prison refuses to respond to her minister, or indeed to the prayers of Cotton Mather. She dies there thinking she will give birth to a demon. The importance of the story is that Doll thinks she is a witch, but the reader sympathizes with her as the pathetic victim of a twisted intellectual climate.

At this point, students might look at a famous non-literary Puritan historian, Perry Miller, who views the Salem Witch Trials as a breakdown of the Puritan's notion of Covenant. They thought of themselves as the Elect, and like the Israelites they needed to confess their sins if God was to forgive and bring them back on track. In an age that believed in witchcraft, the problem arose of the guilty, who confessed their sins, going free, while the innocent, who refused to confess, being accused of evil and punished. Exodus says "You shall not suffer a witch live" (22:18), and the
Puritans, taking this literally, hanged people on the basis of non-material, or "spectral evidence." Miller claims that in the summer of 1692, when the court made the first convictions, Cotton Mather, who had written extensively on and dealt successfully with witchcraft, saw the loophole in the Covenant, but chose to ignore it. He even cautioned John Richards (who had written to Mather) of the danger of convicting the innocent, but he let the court assume complete authority, quite apart from the Puritan ministers. It was Mather's father Increase Mather, who in late October finally questioned the whole matter of "spectre evidence." A merchant, Thomas Brattle, also complained by letter that the court was wrong and its convictions faulty. Governor Phips then stopped the process, but the damage was done. For Perry Miller, the main problem at Salem was religious--a flaw in the Covenant which its major exponent saw, Cotton Mather, saw but failed to mend.

Having a sense of witchcraft it, as well its relation to the Covenant, we are now now ready for a modern perspective. In his play, "The Crucible" (1953), Arthur Miller recreates the events of 1692 to show how one can convict another on extremely subjective evidence. During Un-American Activities Hearings in the U. S. Congress in the 1950s, Sen. Joe McCarthy produced dubious lists of people he claimed were communists. This is a modern witch hunt, and Miller capitalized on it to put on stage his version Salem, knowing people would make the connection. Choosing characters from the original trials, he centers on the conviction and death of a landowner, John
Proctor, who has had a sexual encounter with Abigail Williams, one of the girls who went into the forest. Abigail was only twelve in 1692, so Miller makes her considerably older to fit the role. She is a vicious character who lies to separate John from his wife Elizabeth, a cold Puritan. Ironically, Elizabeth also lies, to save her husband. Mary Warren, a ward of the Proctors, twenty at the time, is reduced to a weak protege of Abigail, and her testimony helps convict John, in spite of Elizabeth. In a highly dramatic scene Mary and Abigail, along with the other girls, cause "spectres" to appear throughout the courtroom, thus giving credence to their testimony. In the end John Proctor, like Joan of Arc in George Bernard Shaw's play "Saint Joan" (1924), decides to lie to save his life, but changes his mind when it becomes clear that his name will be used publicly.

A modern playwright (and here he differs from many historians), Miller has little sympathy for the Court which convicted Proctor, or for either Samuel Parris or Thomas Putnam, the local minister and another landowner, both of whom have daughters implicated in the forest episode. Parris tries to save his own skin, and Putnam seems more interested in increasing his landholdings than pursuing justice. Proctor, accused of not going to church, says that for him "God is not there," something he relates to the hypocrisy of both these men. Miller's concentration on their guilt and Proctor's innocence, in spite of his adultery, leaves the playwright open to ideological
critics, who find him too antagonistic to religion and to capitalism--almost as if he were a communist. At their (religion's and capitalism's) expense, he focuses on a human being who might be sexually weak, but truly honest and forthright. For such critics, this is a dubious use of his art, even though Miller is a great playwright.

Literary historians further complain that Miller fails in not mentioning "spectre evidence," the main issue of 1692. This may not be fair, for though he does focus on convicted landowners (Proctor--and others like Rebecca Nurse and Martha Cory), collapses time to eight days for the sake of unity (Proctor was not hanged until August), and changes the girls' ages to highlight an adulterous affair, he does handle the problem of subjective evidence skillfully and in the process captures the confusing atmosphere of the time. The play is a good exercise in how a playwright changes historical details to get at what for him is "essential truth." We don't feel for the witches here as we do for Doll Bibly, nor do we appreciate the ministers' struggle as in Forbes' story, for Miller is less interested in certain aspects of the 17th Century, but very interested in others (like why the innocent suffer), perhaps because they are so important to his own century--the 20th.

If the students compare the two Millers, Perry and Arthur, one concerned with the flaw in a religious code, the other on how dubious evidence is used to hang people, they will experience two radically different views of Salem.
Now we can add to the picture by reviewing the thought of two more recent historians, Boyer and Nissenbaum, who wrote a book called *Salem Possessed* (1974). They lament the fact that the dramatist Arthur Miller has precluded most historians with his interpretation of Salem, though like Miller they are not so much interested in the psychology of witchcraft (as is Forbes), or in theology (as is Perry Miller), but in the deeper motives for which people accuse others of evil, such as jealousy over another's property—and here the historians Boyer and Nissenbaum are not too far from Arthur Miller, though their view is far more cosmic.

To explain what happened at Salem, Boyer and Nissenbaum stress two factors—geography and geneology. Salem Village was a rural area northwest of the coastal Salem Town. The Village lacked the political independence of surrounding burroughs and was governed from Salem Town, though prior to the Trials Salem had no governor at all. In addition, the Church in the Village was only recently established, and it was insecure because of a series of recent ministers, including Samuel Parris, who were only partially supported by Villagers used to going elsewhere to church. As the century progressed, the Putnams of Salem Village lost their ironworks and found themselves with less land to divide among descendants. The Porters of Salem Town, by contrast, succeeded with their mills, and could buy more land. The result was that the Putnams were squeezed out of power.

Moreover, the local governing board of Salem, which
previously supported Parris and the Village, switched its membership and loyalties to Salem Town, leaving both the Putnams and Paris in precarious positions. And to top off everything, one Joseph Putnam married a Porter, and swung his allegiance to Salem Town. It is in this context of the loss of economic and political clout that Thomas Putnam and Samuel Parris resorted to accusations of witchcraft. And as Boyer and Nissenbaum point out, most of the accused lived outside the Village. John Proctor, during the trials, complained to Boston authorities of the injustice done him as an outside landowner. What is ironic is that, in contrast to Arthur Miller's "Crucible," Boyer and Nissenbaum show considerable sympathy for Putnam and Parris. Rather than looking at them as vain or landhungry, these historians see them as people rendered powerless at the hands of larger landowners, among whom were capitalists like John Proctor.

For Boyer and Nissenbaum, Putnam and Parris, deprived of power and confused by a rising capitalistic economy, resort to a medieval solution to their problems. They were successful (if that's the word) in their simplistic answer because the area was in a period of governmental transition. The new Governor Phips was busy fighting up north and left Stoughton, a rigid disciplinarian who thought crime ought to be punished firmly and quickly, in charge at Salem, and in June he proceeded to convict and hang the first witches. These historians stress the fact, not that Cotton Mather was negligent (as does Perry Miller), but
that Mather had been successful some years before at pre-
venting a similar outbreak when he took two Goodwin girls
into his study for prayer and discussion. And forty years
later, during the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards was able
to stem the tide of witchcraft because in that context most
everybody confessed, lessening the probability of people
indicting each other. Not so at Salem, where property was
at stake, and in the absence of a concerned governor and an
effective clergy, Salem's local leaders--confused and freight-
ened--simply screamed "witch," and disaster visited Salem.

There is another literary view necessary to round out
the students' picture of Salem, and that is Nathaniel
Hawthorne's--one of the earliest and best critics of the
Puritans. Writing in the first half of the 19th Century,
Hawthorne had an ancestor who was a judge at Salem, and he
uses Puritan materials for many of his stories and novels.
In "Young Goodman Brown" (1835) he portrays, like Ester Forbes,
the psychology of witchcraft. Here a man loses Faith (his
wife) by flirting with a black man (the Devil) in the forest.
Later, in his novel The House of the Seven Gables (1851),
Hawthorne develops a curse rooted in a powerful Puritan's
taking property from a poor Quaker family, showing that
Hawthorne is also aware of the relationship between property
and human oppression--a combination that interests moderns
like Arthur Miller and Boyer/Nissenbaum.

But Hawthorne's most insightful story for our purposes
is one of his earliest, "Gentle Boy" (1828), set in New
England years before the Witch Trials. Here the conflict is between two religious bodies, the Puritans and the Quakers. The Puritan hierarchy—much like the Catholic Church during the Inquisition—sees the Quakers as heretics, and their exclusiveness generates violence when a group of Puritan boys, one of whom had been nurtured back to health by Ilbraham, the Gentle Boy, beats up this Quaker youth, who consequently loses his spirit and dies. Ilbraham himself had been taken in by Tobias and Dorothy Pearson, Puritans who emerge as more compassionate than orthodox, but the boys still reflect the attitudes of the Puritan hierarchy in beating up their Quaker peer—an act which disillusion Tobias so that he eventually becomes a Quaker. What seems to interest Hawthorne is that a religious group itself fosters competition between sects, thereby becoming the source of the anger and hatred and destruction it was originally meant to cure or alleviate. One historian, Christine Heyrman, in looking at the Salem Witch Trials, says Proctor was convicted and executed because so many of his relatives were Quakers. Hawthorne's "Gentle Boy," with its convincingly human setting, helps us understand the mystery of evil created when a religion group claims to be the vehicle of heavenly truth, and then excludes—sometimes to the point of death—others who make the same claim.

Once the class has studied Salem from various perspectives, literary and historical, it can begin to make comparisons to our present society. The teacher can facilitate this by
moving through the different authors in our study to see if and how they apply to the Electronic Church. What we learned from Trevor-Roper is that the persecution of witches was organized by the clergy, and through the Roman Church had all the sanction of God. Designed to sniff out dissenters, it pervaded Europe in spite of its intellectual critics, and came to America, ironically, through the Puritans seeking religious freedom. Doll Bilby is an example of a victim of this intolerant climate, and is damned to die not only in it, but as a part of its mentality. In the case of the Salem Witch Trials, many innocent people did try to fight the system, but were suppressed or even killed by it.

We live in a different time, a technological age, and the Electronic Church has employed TV, born of the 1950s, to communicate with millions of ordinary people and collect millions of dollars for its goals. But what are those goals? They are goals supposedly rooted in the Bible that are articulated here and there by the leaders (mostly male) of this media Church, that would save the country by returning to the "ol' time religion" of God, family, and country. For them, the United States, like Israel of the Old Testament, is a chosen people; it is God's country, and its destiny is in his hands, but we must defend it, like King David of old, with all our might. Russia, especially since World War II, is just the opposite--the godless country, the beast of the Apocalypse, trying to conquer the world and must be stopped. Hence, the Electronic Church politically emphasizes a large
defense budget and opposes such disarmament treaties as Salt II.

The family of the EC is the "traditional" family, where the male is the head and the wife subject to him—"wives be subject of your husband as to the Lord." In the name of this family the Electronic Church opposes homosexuality, abortion, pornography, sex education in the school, and women's liberation. The feminist movement is particularly evil because it undermines the family by promoting such concepts as abortion and comparable worth in the market place; therefore, the EC politically opposes the Equal Rights Amendment. To "return to God," on the other hand, means to oppose any kind of secular humanism—the domestic equivalent of communism. Secular Humanism includes public school teachers and college professors who emphasize relativism, don't take Genesis (the creation accounts) literally, teach evolution as fact, oppose prayer in the classroom, and use textbooks that don't mention God and sow doubt about his commandments. Recently an Alabama judge ordered thirty-six textbooks out of the public schools on the grounds they treat secular humanism as though it were a religion. The connections between The Electronic Church and 17th Century witchcraft seem obvious. It is a political as well as religious movement, organized by the clergy, sanctioned by the Church, particularly critical of women and intellectuals, and rooted in persecution—conquering its enemies by word and if necessary by force. Through the media it has come to pervade all churches and classes and is generating
a powerful, negative, "intellectual" climate.

How does one handle this as a teacher? By going back to history. Perry Miller sees in Salem the breakdown of the Covenant. He says Cotton Mather could have made all the difference had he followed his instincts, as did Increase Mather and the layman Thomas Brattle. These two knew what the Bible says about witches, but because they were willing to say the court was unjust and the killings wrong, reason triumphed over an overliteral reading of the Scriptures. In teaching students on the topics of religion and politics, it's important to use reason too (which is the purpose of this paper), and not to get into a "biblical shootout," except to say the Bible, like all literature, has to be interpreted—and here we go back to Edward Carr. Rather than try to prove Russia is not necessarily the biblical beast, for instance, one might discuss other approaches to Russia, such as the importance of cultural exchange programs, in which people meet people in contexts where it is difficult to look at another country as bestial. Or one could stress the fact that the Russian people fear war just like we do, and the recent gestures toward reform and disarmament by Michel Gorbachev seem to be honest and sensible, not just the devious machinations of the Devil. It's important that nations as well as people not live continually on low levels of morality—"an eye for an eye"—but strive to relate as mature people interested in dialogue and understanding.

In regard to women, it's important to point out that
in the history of Judeo-Christianity, as well as in the history of America, women have too often been treated as subjects rather than equals, even though it is possible to interpret Genesis (God taking woman from Adam's rib) as a gesture of human equality, both above the animals and on the same level of being. And the fact that a woman's worth on the job even today is considerably less than a man's is an indication that we have a long way to go toward equality. These are reasonable statements, and students need to think about them, not argue from pre-established positions. The Indian feminist critic Starhawk calls for a spiritual transformation of our culture away from patriarchal death cults toward the love of life, of nature, of the female principle. In regard to secular humanism, a teacher might stress the fact that the humanities are a distillation of the best attitudes of people of all generations toward God and the universe. No sensible person, religious or otherwise, neglects the human. Even Jonathan Edwards, the great Puritan of the 18th Century, respected and integrated the best thought of his day--classic and scientific--into his understanding of God. And above all, we know from the history of witchcraft that, when religions sacrifice the intellect, disaster results.

The research of more recent historians also help us understanding the Electronic Church. Boyer and Nissenbaum say the incidents at Salem occurred because the Puritans in 1692 were inbetween worlds--the medieval and the capitalistic.
Pressed by competition between large families over industry and landholdings, Salem Villagers like Putnam and Parris felt powerless and opted for simplistic answers to complex problems. Since World War II America, like Salem, has been in transition, though to a nuclear, electronic age, but a time of change that has also caused uncertainty and instability. We are a rich nation, but a third of our people are poor. We are a country rooted in individual rights, but for the last forty years large numbers of Blacks, Native Americans, and Chicanos have come to feel excluded from our economic, and therefore our whole cultural system.

After the urban ghettos literally erupted in the 1960s, the American government hastened to pass the Civil Rights Act, along with Medicaid, Medicare and other programs of President Johnson's Great Society; we became a country dedicated to helping the dispossessed. Some rejoiced in this, but others, like the growing Electronic Church, looked at what was happening and saw huge sums of money going into welfare programs to support the elderly, racial minorities, women on AFDC, and homosexuals. And who had to pay for all this they thought, but the middle class, the property owners, and they began to feel powerless. It was in their name that the EC reacted with negative and simplistic positions about God and family and country to combat communists, feminists, and secular humanists they claimed were controlling the media, the schools on all levels, and even the Supreme Court. In the process they began to build their own power
base, and to collect money to support their positions which have become as political as they are religious.

What is ironic about all this is that one can sympathize with powerlessness. We do live in a complex world, and welfare programs don't always work perfectly. Abortion and pornography are not easy to deal with because what is a right of expression for one is dehumanization for another. One can call the other person or group evil, but that doesn't solve the problem. The New Right has elected Ronald Regan because he champions most of the positions of the Electronic Church—from an unlimited defense budget, to prayer in the schools, to radically limiting money for welfare. But these are simplistic answers that only blur the distinction between religion and government and polarize people on key issues. It's interesting that the Catholic Church, where the Inquisition started, and which periodically acts from the top down to suppress women or intellectuals or gays, has recently taken a different approach in pastoral letters by the American Bishops on such things as War and Peace and Economic Justice for All. These documents recognize the complexity of intellectual and moral problems in America, and try to work from basic Christian principles to practical solutions, emphasizing such things as the irrational and self-defeating nature of the arms race and the need to use our wealth first of all to address the problems of poverty and homelessness. Such pastoral letters represent an intelligent and humanizing as well as a Gospel approach to our times.
They are not negative, or name-calling, but invite discussion by anyone who thinks about and feels for the human race.

We now need to return to Arthur Miller, for he adds a surprising dimension to our discussion. In his play in 1953 he concentrates on innocent individuals. It's interesting that Miller is a contemporary of the Electronic Church, and like them shares the anxiety of an age of uncertainty. Writing shortly after World War II, he was upset with the McCarthy Hearings where the government struck out at so-called communists. Miller's play is a reaction to that kind of witch-hunting. In "The Crucible" he changes things about Salem. Not so much interested in the struggles of the clergy or the psychology of the witches, he creates a love triangle to set up the tragic consequences of convicting fallible but basically innocent people. In a way Miller is antithesis of the Moral Majority or the Electronic Church. He is the secular humanist they lambast. And through the play he returns the favor through his handling of a vain minister and a landgrabber who use religion as a smoke screen.

Ironically, in "The Crucible" Miller anticipates what has happened this spring in the Electronic Church. Jimmy Bakker, the champion of family values was caught in a sex scandal, and only recently the board of the PTL cut off his $1.6 million annual salary, a figure that betrays the essential materialism of his ministry. Following the PTL affair, Washington Week in Review on National Public Radio observed that the real losers in this case are the faithful who lost
their money, much like those who invest in the stockmarket. Miller is a creative playwright, and that is what art is about; it is a fiction that tells the truth. Implied in his approach is a criticism of any church or government who in their self-righteousness or materialism neglect innocent victims—victims like a Black or Indian who doesn't reflect middle-class values, an uneducated and pregnant woman who never had a chance to penetrate the American Dream of success, or a gay whose parents cannot understand why he can't be normal. These kind of people, for Miller, are also the innocent victims of a system that preaches God, the evil of sex, and the corruption of welfare, but too often ignores or neglects the most helpless in our midst.

Finally, there is Nathaniel Hawthorne. His story "Gentle Boy" is one of the consequences of exclusiveness, the violent effects of one religion excluding another. It is interesting that the Quakers are a simple sect—far less structural or aggressive than the Puritans. The Scriptural passages which interest them have to do the life of Christ when he says, "love your enemies, do good those who hate you," or "if a man "slaps you one one cheek, turn the other." These are the people the Puritans considered heretics. That is why Hawthorne's story is full of ironies. Tobias came to America for material reasons, not religious freedom as did most Puritans, yet he is the one who changes to a Quaker because of Puritan violence. His wife Dorothy is a pious mother, and unlike the minister who curses the Quakers, she
takes Gentle Boy into her home. In their humanity these people undercut the Church's leaders whose preaching is responsible for the Puritan childrens' hatred of Quakers and the death of Gentle Boy. One of the problems of groups like the Electoric Church is that they are exclusive. In its effort to save America and the family, the EC of late has attacked other groups--communists, secular humanists, feminists--who are the enemy. Instead of looking at the "Body of Christ" where there is "neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free," it has fostered a mentality of the godly vs. the secular, right vs. left, straight vs. gay, white vs. colored, rich vs. poor. One wonders what Hawthorne would do with these dichotomies if he were alive today.

In a classroom, however, it's important not to be negative, even about the Electronic Church. What we need is understanding. When Thomas Jefferson argued for the separation of church and state, he did so because the Puritan experience before him created intolerance between religious groups. He wanted religions to thrive, and thought this was possible only if they were free to think what they wanted, but not to impose that thought on others. What we need in our complex, diverse society is to see that it's possible, even healthy, to think and act differently, as we relate as human beings. Nor should we categorize individuals within groups. It's possible to be a feminist and reject abortion. It's possible to love America and criticize our involvement in Vietnam. The lifestyle of homosexuals may offend us, but
that's no reason to reject them as human beings. Christ shocked his followers by constantly reaching out to the outcasts. What we might learn from Hawthorne is that too often the source of oppression lies precisely in the hands of those who preach freedom from oppression, and in the name of peace and love generate hatred and violence.

The study of the Salem Witch Trials, therefore, is a good way to examine the Electronic Church, or those who mix religion with money and power. It's important to see that literary and historical critics view Salem through different lenses. And, as Edward Carr reminds us, the best ones are the most creative in assembling the pieces of their historical puzzles into understandable wholes. Salem Puritans lived in a period of transition, and that complicated their decisions. So do we live in an age of anxiety and uncertainty, and must make significant choices from this context. We may want to do this as religious people, but without losing our reason and common sense. The task of the teacher in the classroom is not to tell students how to think, or to go witch-hunting, whether that be for a Medieval Church, a Puritan Church, or an Electronic Church. It is rather to help them see things in perspective, and how novelists as well as historians interpret key events. If there is a problem with the Electronic Church, it is because its leaders--the leaders, not necessary the people--are repeating something in history that may be unnecessary. Mathew Arnold, writing during a time of great conflict
between religion and society in the 19th Century, says that Culture expands when we relate "the best that has been thought and said" in the world to our "instinct for beauty and conduct." In that way, he says, we will make "reason and the will of God prevail." If teachers can do that, through studies like this, they will have fulfilled their mission.
Works Cited


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