4.7: New England in the Late Seventeenth Century—Declension, Witchcraft, and the Dominion of New England

By 1660, New England had grown in population and wealth. Despite this fact, or perhaps because of it, many among the Puritan leadership lamented that their mission was in danger of failing; this falling away from their original purpose is known as “declension.” There were several indicators that declension had indeed set in. The most obvious sign was that the children and grandchildren of the first generation appeared to be losing the piety characteristic of their elders, and, as a consequence, the proportion of church members to non-members was declining alarmingly. Puritan ministers pointed out that should this trend continue it would affect not just the current church population but also that to come, as only children of full church members could be baptized. Those who were not baptized could not become church members themselves. In 1662, in a desperate move to avoid this eventuality, Massachusetts clergy adopted the Half-Way Covenant. According to this doctrine, children of partial members could be baptized and thus would be eligible for full church membership upon a conversion experience. The more orthodox Puritans denigrated this approach, and many left the Congregational Churches to join what they saw as the more strictly separatist sect, the Baptists. Fears of declension and the adoption of the Half-Way Covenant were only the beginning of troubles for the New England colonies, however. More serious problems came just before and after the Glorious Revolution of 1688.

4.8.1: The Dominion of New England

Charles II died in 1685. Before his death, he had begun to curtail the activities of the Bay Colony, especially in light of the fact that in the 1660s and 1670s, the colony refused to obey the Navigation Acts, would not allow appeals from the courts in the Bay Colony to England, and purchased Maine from the Gorges proprietors without permission. To make matters worse, in 1678 the General Court of Massachusetts announced to Parliament that “The laws of England are grounded within the four seas, and do...not reach America.”

Thus, in 1684, the Crown revoked the Charter of Massachusetts Bay and combined all of the New England colonies, in...
addition to New York and East and West Jersey, into the Dominion of New England. Local assemblies, including the revered New England town meetings, were abolished, and the Dominion was placed under the direct control of a governor-general appointed by the Crown, a lieutenant governor, and an appointed council. Male suffrage was expanded, taxes were raised, and no longer did one have to belong to the Congregational church to be able to vote. Sir Edmund Andros was appointed the first royal governor of the Dominion. A further slap in the faces of the Puritan leaders came when an Anglican Church was established in Boston, bringing the Puritan monopoly to an end.

When Charles’s brother, James II, came to the throne in 1685, he immediately alarmed English Protestants. His open support of English Catholics and Catholicism in general led to the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the succession of his Protestant daughter Mary and her husband William of Orange. In the colonies, a series of uprisings broke out that threw royal governors out of office and replaced them with colonial leaders. In Massachusetts, a rebellion led to the overthrow of Andros and the dissolution of the Dominion of New England. William and Mary, however, refused the request of Massachusetts for a new charter; instead, Massachusetts Bay was combined with Plymouth and became a royal colony. Though the General Court was re-established, a person no longer had to be a church member to be elected to the Court; it appeared that the holy experiment had come to an end.

4.8.2: Witchcraft in Salem

Three years later, in spring 1692, when a new royal charter had just been issued and tension spread throughout Massachusetts, several girls in Salem Village, what is now Danvers, became ill. Among those afflicted were the daughter and niece of the local minister Samuel Parris. After the girls began to have fits, which a minister described as “beyond the power of natural disease to effect,” and were closely questioned, they admitted that they had been experimenting with the occult under the tutelage of Tituba, a West Indian servant and possibly a slave, in the Parris household. The fact that the devil was at work in society was part and parcel of the Puritan belief system, and they tended to blame the works of the devil for all the misdoings in society. Indeed, Cotton Mather, a leading Puritan minister in Boston, was famous for his pronouncements on witches. In his book, *Memorable Providences Relating to Witchcrafts and Possessions* (1689 and reprinted in 1691), he examined the case of a mason in Boston, whose children had been possessed by the devil and encouraged to steal from neighbors; the woman accused of witchcraft was executed. Mather was determined “after this, never to use but just one grain of patience with any man that shall go to impose upon me a Denial of Devils, or of Witches. I shall count that man Ignorant who shall suspect, but I shall count him down-right Impudent if he Assert the Non-Existence of things which we have had such palpable Convictions of.”
When the girls of Salem Village confessed that they had been studying the occult and were perhaps the victims of witchcraft, they were ordered to reveal their afflicters. They pointed to Tituba who, upon being whipped, named her two accomplices: Sarah Good and Sarah Osborne. These two women made perfect victims for what is considered by most historians to have been mass adolescent hysteria, as Sarah Good was a homeless beggar and Sarah Osborne had long been suspect because of her refusal to attend church services. Non-conformity was not a value in Puritan society, and anyone who was outside the mold was viewed suspiciously. A special court was established to hear the cases, in which the girls were the main witnesses. During the cross examination of the “witches,” the girls threw themselves on the floor and writhed and groaned. The initial accusations were only the beginning, and as the girls received more and more attention, they pointed their fingers at additional residents of Salem Village and nearby Ipswich, whom they claimed to have seen riding broomsticks, sitting in trees, floating through the air, appearing as wolves, and anything else they imagined that witches would be able to do. If rational residents accused the girls of nonsense, they, too, became victims of the accusers. Before the hysteria ended in the summer of 1693, more than one hundred persons had been cited and nineteen put to death. Of those executed, eighteen were hanged, and one, Giles Corey, an eighty-year-old farmer, was pressed to death. One of the victims, George Burroughs, was a Congregational minister; fourteen of the nineteen executed were women.

Robert Calef, an eyewitness to the execution of Reverend Burroughs, whose accusers claimed that the ghost of a deceased woman told them that Burroughs had killed her, described the scene:

Mr. Burroughs was carried in a Cart with others, through the streets of Salem, to Execution. When he was upon the Ladder, he made a speech for the clearing of his Innocency, with such Solemn and Serious Expressions as were to the Admiration of all present; his Prayer (which he concluded by repeating the Lord’s Prayer) was so well worded, and uttered with such composedness as such fervency of spirit, as was very Affecting, and drew Tears from many, so that it seemed to some that the spectators would hinder the execution. The accusers said the black Man [Devil] stood and dictated to him. As soon as he was…[hung], Mr. Cotton Mather, being mounted upon a Horse, addressed himself to the People, partly to declare that [Mr. Burroughs] was no ordained Minister, partly to possess the People of his guilt, saying that the devil often had been transformed into the Angel of Light. And this did somewhat appease the People, and the Executions went on; when he [Mr. Burroughs] was cut down, he
was dragged by a Halter to a Hole, or Grave, between the Rocks, about two feet deep…

Before he was hung, Reverend Burroughs recited the Lord’s Prayer perfectly, an act that witches were not supposed to be able to perform.

The mass hysteria that was the witchcraft “scare” ended in the fall of 1693, when well-connected people, including the wife of Governor Phipps, were accused and the educated elite of Boston began to pressure the Governor to set aside spectral evidence. Even Increase Mather wrote in 1693 that the devil could take the shape of an innocent person and that it was better that ten witches go free than one innocent person be condemned. But while many of the ministers of Massachusetts Bay eschewed the proceedings after the fact, none spoke up until the hysteria had consumed the colony for eighteen months. Influenced by the writings of ministers such as Cotton and Increase Mather, they could in fact see the workings of the devil in Massachusetts; it was far easier to blame the Devil than to look too closely at the society Puritan orthodoxy had created. When the mass hysteria ended in 1693, it coincided with the end of the Holy Commonwealth and the decline of the “city on a hill.”

Compared to the witch hunts that occurred in Europe at about the same time, the one in Salem Village was mild and had at least some humane features, if the word humane can be applied to a witch hunt. In the first place, the Salem witches were hung and not burned to death, and, in the second, most of those involved in the furor later confessed their mistakes. Twenty years later, the Massachusetts courts annulled the convictions and granted indemnity to the victims and their families.

Sidebar \(\PageIndex{1}\):

Puritans In historical literature The following points of view illustrate the historical controversies that have arisen about the Puritans over the last one hundred years. The Puritans, those of Massachusetts Bay as well as the Pilgrims of Plymouth, were in fact the earliest American historians and thought of their own history as the manifestation of God’s will. They considered themselves to be the chosen people who, like the Jews, were given a place set apart for them to build a new Canaan. According to John Winthrop, Massachusetts was “a city on a hill,” a model for a new Christian utopia. Although Thomas Jefferson and numerous other important figures would later reject the Puritan interpretation of history, historian Perry Miller’s claim in The American Puritans, 1956, that “without some understanding of Puritanism, there is no understanding of America” is not without merit and can be seen in later reevaluations of the significance of the Puritans in American thought.

The Anti-Puritan Perspective

Historians have been of two minds about the Puritans. According to one group, represented by Harvard graduates Charles Francis Adams and Brooks Adams at the turn of the twentieth century, the Puritans founded undemocratic colonies dominated by a Puritan elite. These colonies repressed dissenters, resisted change, and were narrow-minded in their outlook. According to this historiographical school, the Puritans created a "glacial period" of frozen, stifled intellectual life that lasted until the American Revolution. In the Progressive era of the early twentieth century through the 1920s, negative appraisals of the Puritans were even more common. H. L. Mencken wrote in 1924 that Puritanism was “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” Mencken saw parallels between the Puritans and those of his own day who wanted to censor books and continue prohibition. James Truslow Adams agreed that the Puritans repressed not only the individual’s public life but regulated private life as well with restrictive religious precepts. Further,
he argued that Puritanism was an economic ideology promoted by the middle class to justify its domination of the lower classes. The Puritan leaders “looked with fear, as well as jealousy, upon any possibility of allowing control of policy of law and order, and of legislation concerning person and property, to pass to others.” Other historians like Vernon Parrington, writing in Main Currents in American Thought, argued that the Puritans contributed little to important American ideals.

**Intellectual Contributions**

On the other hand, a second group of historians has tended to appreciate the contributions of the Puritans to intellectual life. These historians point out that the Puritans established the first public school system in the Americas and the first college. They also see the Puritans as the torchbearers of liberty, who came to America in search of religious freedom. Their austerities and other seemingly repressive measures were dictated by the harsh conditions of the land and times in which they lived. This school of thought, represented by John Gorham Palfrey (1858–1890), credits the Puritans with the development of such American virtues as hard work, thriftiness, and social responsibility. In a reaction to the anti-Puritanism of the 1920s, historians of the 1930s, such as the Harvard professor Samuel Elliot Morison, attempted to portray the Puritans as “real” people who were not averse to the simple pleasures of life and who contributed much to the intellectual life of early America. Daniel Boorstin argued that the Puritans were successful because of their practicality, another American virtue.

4.8.3: Before You Move On...

**Key Concepts**

When charters were issued to the Puritans who settled Plymouth and Massachusetts, a key component was the statement of purpose for the removal of these Calvinists to the Americas; both charters mentioned the need to spread the Christian gospel to the Indians. And, though the Puritans were ever mindful of their purpose, early relations with the natives were uneven at best; not until after the Pequot War did the work of John Eliot, Apostle to the Indians, begin. Eventually, Praying Towns appeared in Massachusetts Bay, and “praying Indians” were educated in the teachings of the Bible. Many went on to attend Harvard, which its president hoped would become the “Indian Oxford.” But apart from success with Christianization, the late seventeenth century was not a positive period for the New England Puritans. Declension became a problem as more and more of the second and third generations failed to join the church. Massachusetts Bay lost its charter and was incorporated with the other New England colonies into the Dominion of New England, and even when the Dominion was Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth failed to obtain new charters from the Crown. Rather, these two Puritan settlements were combined under one royal governor. These problems, in addition to the witchcraft, led ministers to lament in one jeremiad after another that their mission had failed and the holy experiment was at an end.

**Test Yourself**

Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)

Who among the following was banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony?
a. John Cotton and Richard Mather
b. John Winthrop and Roger Williams
c. Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson
d. Anne Hutchinson and John Winthrop

Answer
c

Exercise \(\PageIndex{2}\))

The “Apostle to the Indians” was the Puritan minister:

a. John Eliot
b. John Cotton
c. John Winthrop
d. Cotton Mather

Answer
a

Exercise \(\PageIndex{3}\))

The West Indian servant whose tales of witchcraft initiated the witchcraft scare in the Salem Village was:

a. Sarah Good
b. Sara Parris
c. Tituba
d. Massasoit

Answer
c

Exercise \(\PageIndex{4}\))

King Philip’s war broke out when a praying Indian and graduate of Harvard was assassinated by a Wampanoag.

a. True
b. False
Exercise \( \PageIndex{5} \)

The Dominion of New England was created in part to punish Massachusetts Bay for its failure to convert the local Indian tribes.

a. True

b. False

Answer

b