

The Wonders of the Invisible World

(1693)

Cotton Mather

Introduction

In 1689, Cotton Mather's *Memorable Providence Relating to Witchcraft and Possessions* had fanned the fires of witchcraft hysteria in New England. The fear of witches led to a series of dramatic trials in Salem, Massachusetts, which culminated in nineteen people being put to death. With members of the elite being targeted by the court, Mather rushed to put a halt to the trials. Faced with the opposition of Mather and the new governor, the Salem witch trials came to an end.

Questions to Consider

1. By 1693, even the most zealous opponents of witchcraft were calling for moderation. Explain Cotton Mather's call to his fellow villagers to unite.
2. According to Mather, what role does God play in dealing with witchcraft?
3. What point is Mather trying to make when he compares "an Apparition of the slain Party" to spectral evidence?
4. After such an enthusiastic prosecution of witchcraft the previous year, why do you think Cotton Mather decided to issue this call for moderation?

Source

'Tis necessary that we unite in every thing: but there are especially two Things wherein our Union must carry us along together. We are to unite in our Endeavours to deliver our distressed Neighbours, from the horrible Annoyances and Molestations with which a dreadful Witchcraft is now persecuting of them. But then we are to unite in such methods for this deliverance, as may be unquestionably safe, lest the latter end be worse than the beginning.

And here, what shall I say? I will venture to say thus much, That we are safe, when we make just as much use of all Advice from the invisible World, as God sends it for. It is a safe Principle, That when God Almighty permits any Spirits from the unseen Regions, to visit us with surprizing Informations, there is then something to be enquired after; we are then to enquire of one another, What cause there is for such things? The peculiar Government of God, over the unbodied Intelligences, is a sufficient Foundation for this Principle. When there has been a Murder committed, an Apparition of the slain Party, accusing of any Man, altho' such Apparitions have oftner spoke true than false, is not enough to Convict the Man as guilty of that Murder; but yet it is a sufficient occasion for Magistrates to make a particular Enquiry, whether such a Man have afforded any ground for such an Accusation. Even so a Spectre exactly resembling such or such a Person, when the Neighbourhood are tormented by such Spectres, may reasonably make Magistrates inquisitive whether the Person so represented have done or said any thing that may argue their confederacy with Evil Spirits, altho' it may be defective enough in point of Conviction; especially at a time, when 'tis possible, some overpowerful Conjuror may have got the skill of thus exhibiting the Shapes of all sorts of Persons, on purpose to stop the prosecution of the Wretches, whom due Enquiries thus provoked, might have made obnoxious unto Justice.

Source: Cotton Mather, *The Wonders of the Invisible World: Being an Account of the Tryals of Several Witches Lately Excecuted in New-England* (Amherst, WI, 1862), pp. 13-28.