Stewart Justman
Prof. Emeritus
University of Montana
Missoula, MT

Can Belief Be Compelled?

Evidence from Salem

Abstract

In his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, which underlies the separation of church and state in the United States, Locke argues forcefully that belief cannot be compelled under any circumstances. I put this proposition to the test by examining false confessions extracted during the Salem witch-hunt only three years after Locke's letter was translated into English. Evidence in the Salem records—in particular, a deposition signed by six accused witches—establishes that a number of confessors believed their own false narratives at the time they offered them. Of great psychological interest, these cases give us a sense of what the Salem hysteria felt like to those engulfed by it. They also invalidate Locke's claim that belief can never be compelled. The truth seems to be that our immunity to coerced belief is an illusion that can be maintained only by excluding all evidence to the contrary. The record of Salem shows that power can shake our foundations, pervert our conscience, fracture identity, compel beliefs.

Belief and Coercion

Jefferson's historic Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia (1779) begins with an affirmation of twin principles: that "the opinions and beliefs of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds," and that minds are therefore "altogether insusceptible of restraint." For their original audience

these stirring words must have had great resonance, echoing as they do the argumentation of Locke's forceful *Letter Concerning Toleration*, first translated from Latin into English in 1689. "To believe this or that to be true does not depend upon our will," declares Locke (Locke, 1955). And because belief rests on a process as involuntary as the eyes' reception of light, it simply cannot be compelled, according to Locke. Others can exhort me to accept proposition X but they cannot make me embrace it as true if it does not seem to me to be so. They can leave a pamphlet on my doorstep but cannot enter the inner chambers of my mind where the spontaneous act of believing or not believing takes place. Belief cannot be compelled.

As I hope to show, this theory of an impregnable self is overstated. Unfortunately, belief *can* be compelled at times. It is better to ground the case for toleration on a recognition of this chastening reality than on the idealistic abstraction of a self that cannot be violated.

An Empirical Question

The prologue of the *Letter Concerning Toleration* argues with considerable passion and eloquence that true Christianity consists in the regulation of oneself, not the domination of others, and that it is a religion of peace, not the sword. This done, the work of the *Letter* begins, and Locke undertakes to "to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion, and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other." It is in this connection that Locke contends that belief, but above all religious

belief, cannot be coerced, quite as if the futility of coercion marked out a natural line of demarcation between the rightful concerns of the state and the concern of persons for their own souls. "No man can, if he would, conform his faith to the dictates of another. All the life and power of true religion consists in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing. . . . And such is the nature of the understanding that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force. Confiscation of estate, imprisonment, torments, nothing of that nature can have any such efficacy as to make men change the inward judgment that they have framed of things."

One is struck by the absoluteness of Locke's rhetoric: "no man"; "all the life and power"; "the belief of anything"; "nothing of that nature." If the very "nature of the understanding" authorizes such strong claims, then nature itself has set a hard limit to the magistrate's power. But while the asserted natural immunity to coercion is clearly of great importance to Locke (providing as it does the psychological foundation of his argument for separation of church and state), we note that he offers no evidence in support of the proposition that belief cannot be compelled. After all, no number of examples would suffice to establish that people can *never* be made to believe anything. By the same token, however, a few solid examples to the contrary would be enough to invalidate the categorical claim that "belief of anything" cannot be compelled. I propose to supply such examples.

We do not need to board a time machine to find well-documented cases of persons under duress adopting beliefs they would never conceivably entertain otherwise. The fact is that only three years after the English translation of the *Letter*, and even as Locke

continued to engage in follow-up polemics on the issue of toleration, a number of accused witches in and around Salem, Massachusetts did, by their own admission, come to believe the bizarre allegations against them. Their cases are all the more pertinent in that both they and their inquisitors belonged to a sect that left England because it did not enjoy there the freedom of conscience for which Locke pleads.

Under pressure to confess, the accused of Salem and its environs began to tell similar stories. They admitted to encountering bewitched animals, flying on poles, attending assemblies of witches, signing the Devil's book (thus entering into a contract), taking part in parodic sacraments, afflicting the innocent. Significantly, many of these motifs made their first appearance in the narrative of a confessor who initially denied being a witch but then, probably after being beaten (Burr, 1914; Norton, 2003), admitted the fact and fleshed out her confession with a multitude of conventional details. The confessor was the Indian slave Tituba—a practitioner of counter-magic—and though we cannot know for sure, she may have believed the fantasies which she produced and others built upon. Her confession was deemed credible, and after delivering it she did not retract it.

With one confession setting off another, the norms of evidence in the Salem interrogations were stretched to allow for "spectral evidence," that is, visionary sightings of the accused engaged in acts like those reported by Tituba, such as signing the Devil's book. Apparently, once a recruit covenanted with the Devil in this manner, the Devil was free to assume the person's likeness and go about afflicting others *as* that person. Hence an indicted witch might have no knowledge or awareness of the crimes he or she was accused

of committing. Bewildered and in a state of fear, such persons might well end up believing the charges against them despite, or perhaps because of, their fantastic character.

But can the Devil take the form of an innocent, the better to sow confusion and cause injury? According to the Reverend John Hale, a close observer of and early commentator on

the Salem outbreak, the first principle of witch prosecutions in New England prior to 1692 was that "the Devil could not assume the shape of an innocent person in doing mischief unto mankind" (Burr, 1914). When their likeness was sighted doing the Devil's work, some of the accused of Salem and its environs must have felt, accoringly, that they had to be guilty because the Devil could not have taken their form otherwise. Even if the accused simply did not know what to believe on this critical point, the claim that the Devil had impersonated them could have damaged their sense of innocence and made them more receptive to the fabulous accusations against them. Someone with an impaired sense of certainty would be no match for interrogators possessed of the ferocity and conviction of those of Salem.

One might suppose it would be quite impossible to convince people they committed misdeeds about which they know nothing. Unhappily, that is not true. Because confession was held to be the most incontrovertible evidence of witchcraft in Massachusetts as in England, every legal means was used to obtain it, and in cases reviewed below, the relentless pressure to confess so unnerved the accused that they were reduced to confusion and, in the end, acquiescence. Centuries before detectives broke down interrogated suspects by suggesting that they had no awareness of their crime

because they blacked it out (Leo & Davis, 2010), the concept of spectral evidence explained to the accused why they had no knowledge of their own attacks on the community. But not only did many of the accused confess: some also believed, if only temporarily, what was demanded of them. The idealistic principle that belief cannot be compelled under any circumstances crumbled under pressure.

Amid the Salem hysteria, the accused confessed to things as petty as pinching their neighbors and as grandiose as working to set up the kingdom of Satan. They confessed to riding on poles over the trees and attending diabolical convocations. Of the 156 persons indicted in the Salem investigations, 50 confessed, of whom only six were tried (Craker, 1997). Given these numbers, we might assume that many confessed not because they came to believe the extravagant accusations against them, but simply to placate their interrogators and avoid execution. Consider, for example, the case of Margaret Jacobs, whose grandfather was indeed executed (she herself being one of his accusers [Norton, 2003]). So terrified that she confessed to witchcraft, Margaret Jacobs was so aghast at her own perjury that she could not sleep "the very first night" and accordingly retracted her confession in full. As she wrote some months later,

> May it please the honoured court, I was cried out upon by some of the possessed persons, as afflicting them; whereupon I was brought to my examination, which persons at the sight of me fell down, which did very much startle and affright me. The Lord above knows I knew nothing, in the least measure, how or who afflicted them; they told me, without doubt I did, or else they would not fall down at me; they

> told me, if I would not confess, I should be put down in the dungeon and would be hanged, but if I would confess I should have my life; the which did so affright me, with my own vile wicked heart, to save my life; made me make the like confession I did [sic], which confession, may it please the honoured court, is altogether false and untrue. The very first night after I had made confession, I was in such horror of conscience that I could not sleep for fear the devil should carry me away for telling such horrid lies. (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1977)

Let us assume that Margaret Jacobs knew full well her confession was false at the moment she made it. Even so, this would hardly establish that everyone else in and around Salem was similarly immune to coercion.

Other accused witches may have been so shaken by the sight of their accusers writhing and fainting in the courtroom that they could not think clearly; or so oppressed by a sense of their own "vile wicked heart" that they could no longer be sure of their innocence; or so uncertain whether the devil could take the form of an innocent person that they felt that they might or must be guilty because their form was observed performing a diabolical act; or so fearful that the devil would carry them away that they came to envision flying on a diabolical conveyance like the poles mentioned repeatedly in the Salem transcripts. They may have so dreaded lying—a sin thought to imperil the soul—that they had no recourse but to imagine that their confession was true. That confessions were induced by the threat of the gallows does not necessarily mean that the confessors offered

them in all cynicism. "Some even came to believe, under heavy psychological pressure, that they actually were witches" (Rosenthal, 1993).

The conclusion that some confessors came to believe their own narratives is not one reached only by observers looking back on the sad events of 1692 with the benefit of historical distance. An outspoken critic of the witch-hunt at the time, the merchant Thomas Brattle, visited many of those jailed as witches and came away with the impression that they were simultaneously "deluded, imposed upon, and under the influence of some evil spirit" (Burr, 1914). The characterization of the prisoners as deluded (presumably as a result of being "imposed upon") distinctly implies that they believed the far-fetched confessions that had been extracted from them. Among the imprisoned was Deliverance Hobbs following her examination in Salem on April 22, 1692. Pelted by her interrogators with impossible questions such as why she tormented her accusers, how she came to engage in witchcraft, and whether she did so in person or through her likeness, Deliverance Hobbs replied in each instance that she did not know, quite as if she simply lacked the certainty required to reject the accusations against her in toto. The transcript of her interrogation contains no sign that she disbelieved the confession she proceeded to offer, even though she invented it then and there.

The vulnerability of belief to coercion is an empirical question to be decided by evidence, not by theory or declaratory argument. In the spirit of the empirical, I intend to draw on the Salem transcripts—documents which take us as close to the actual words and thoughts of the accused as we are going to get. I will concentrate on the cases of Mary Tyler and Mary Osgood of Andover, both of whom confessed to being witches after being

put under excruciating pressure to do so, and both of whom believed their confessions at the time, as they later admitted in writing. While that belief soon evaporated, their return to their senses certainly does not prove that they were immune to coerced belief all along, and they knew it. The two cases are unusually well documented but not unique; indeed, what befell these women befell others as well.

Mary Tyler

According to Robert Calef, a critic of the Salem trials of whom little is known,

> there are numerous instances . . . of the tedious examinations before private persons, many hours together; they all that time urging them to confess (and taking time to persuade them), till the accused were wearied out by being forced to stand so long, or for want of sleep, etc., and so brought to give an assent to what they said; they then asking them, Were you at a witch meeting?, or Have you signed the Devil's book? etc. Upon their replying Yes, the whole was drawn into form as their confession. (Burr, 1914)

The implication seems to be that the accused were so worn down physically that they were willing to offer up the confessions that were demanded of them. But those subjected to these intolerable ordeals could have been worn down not just physically but morally and

mentally, in which case they might well begin to believe the tales extorted from them. Something like this happened to Mary Tyler.

A rich source of insight into the confession dramas of 1692 is a detailed report of the case of Mary Tyler by Increase Mather after he visited her in prison. Included in the collection of documents just cited, this report establishes that Mary Tyler confessed after being importuned, harangued and terrified by a "brother"—that is, brother-in-law, John Bridges—in concert with a third party, Rev. John Emerson, who may have beaten her:

> Goodwife Tyler says that when she was first apprehended, she had no fears upon her and did think that nothing could have made her confess against herself. But since, she has found to her great grief, that she had wronged the truth and falsely accused herself. She said that when she was brought to Salem, her brother Bridges rode with her; and that all the way from Andover to Salem, her brother kept telling her that she must needs be a witch, since the afflicted accused her, and at her touch were raised out of their fits, and urging her to confess herself a witch. She as constantly told him that she was no witch, that she knew nothing of witchcraft, and begged him not to urge her to confess. However, when she came to Salem, she was carried to a room, where her brother on one side and Mr. John Emerson on the other side, did tell her that she was certainly a witch and that she saw the Devil before her eyes at that time (and, accordingly, the said Emerson would attempt with his hand to beat him away from her eyes); and they so urged her to confess that she wished herself in any dungeon, rather than be so treated. . . . [Her brother Bridges] still

> asserted it, and said that God would not suffer so many good men to be in such an error about it, and that she would be hanged if she did not confess; and continued so long and so violently to urge and press her to confess that she thought, verily, that her life would have gone from her, and became so terrified in her mind that she owned, at length, almost anything that they propounded to her; that she had wronged her conscience in so doing; she was guilty of a great sin in belying of herself and desired to mourn for it as long as she lived. (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1977)[1]

As if being tortured by a "brother" were not enough, a second family circumstance, this one in the background of events, bore down on Mary Tyler. The fact is that her daughter Martha Sprague, aged sixteen, appears to have been the first in Andover to complain of preternatural torments like those in Salem (Norton, 2003). (Martha Sprague figures as a victim in many cases; a man sent to the gallows, Samuel Wardwell, was indicted for persecuting her.) In effect, Mary Tyler's daughter instigated the wave of accusations that in time overtook Mary herself. As the outbreak spread from its point of origin, thirteen-year-old Rose Foster—distantly related to Martha Sprague—joined in. That Mary Tyler was indicted for tormenting Hannah Foster, Rose's mother, suggests that she was trapped in a web of associations and may have felt, with some reason, that to disbelieve the charges against her was also to disbelieve her daughter. The woman who was badgered, importuned and ultimately terrified into confessing to witchcraft—a woman held prisoner by two men convinced of her guilt, one of whom spoke in the accents of kinship while the

other may actually have struck her, in an unscripted version of good cop/bad cop—this woman was at the mercy of a series of events set in motion by her own child. But that is not all. To redouble all these woes, Mary Tyler's daughter Hannah was indicted for afflicting Rose Foster herself and thus stood in the same legal position as her mother, a circumstance undoubtedly known to the latter. And looming over all these events was the threat of the gallows. This unheard-of sea of troubles besetting Mary Tyler is not exactly conducive to mental clarity.

If we read Mather's report of Mary Tyler's case with the fixed assumption that she is a Lockean subject who "cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force," it will probably confirm that preconception. On this showing, although she confesses under great pressure to being a witch, she does not actually believe herself a witch; on the contrary, she realizes that with her confession she has betrayed the truth, a "great sin" she will lament for the rest of her life. But did Mary Tyler mouth a confession she disbelieved at the time—a confession of convenience? Perhaps not. That she "became . . . terrified in her mind" suggests she may have lacked the composure to stage-manage a sham confession. Possibly her defenses collapsed, she suffered a loss of clarity, and only after the fact—when she returned to herself—realized that she "wronged her conscience" in confessing. A second document bears out this interpretation.

The tortures that made Mary Tyler believe, if only for a time, that she was guilty as charged are detailed in an undated deposition by her and five others: Mary Osgood (of whom more presently), Deliverance Dane, Abigail Barker. Sarah Wilson, and Mary Tyler's daughter Hannah Tyler. Recounting a series of events similar to those described by Mather

but delving more deeply into the prisoners' state of mind, this document makes it clear that the signatories were put under such relentless pressure to confess that they lost their bearings completely.

The story begins with their arrest in Andover:

> Knowing ourselves altogether innocent of the crime, we were all exceedingly astonished and amazed and consternated and affrighted, even out of our reason, and our nearest and dearest relations, seeing us in that dreadful condition, and knowing our great danger, apprehended there was no other way to save our lives, as the case was then circumstanced, but by our confessing ourselves to be such and such persons as the afflicted represented us to be, they, out of tenderness and pity persuaded us to confess what we did confess. And indeed that confession . . . was no other than what was suggested to us by some gentlemen; they were telling us that we were witches, and they knew it, and we knew it, which made us think that it was so; and our understandings, our reason, our faculties almost gone, we were not capable of judging of our condition; as also the hard measures they used with us rendered us incapable of making our defence, but said anything and every thing which they desired. . . . Some time after, when we were better composed, they telling us what we had confessed, we did profess that we were innocent and ignorant of such things. (Boyer and Nissenbaum, 1977)

Like Mary Tyler, it seems, the others were informed that confession was the only way to escape the gallows. One of these others was in fact her daughter Hannah, and we can only imagine the multiplier effect of seeing a loved one in terror herself. But it would be a mistake to jump to the conclusion that anyone threatened with execution in such circumstances would naturally offer up a false confession while keeping her real beliefs unvoiced. In an infamous recent case discussed below, the false confessors seem to have invested all the more belief in their narratives precisely because they were led to suppose that their lives depended on it. In the present case, we have first-hand evidence that Mary Tyler and the others did not give confessions they knew to be false. The interrogators' unwavering insistence that the women were witches, and knew they were witches, "made us think that it was so." Contrary to Locke's claim that no torment can make anyone believe anything, the deponents suffered such a loss of understanding under the torture of "examination" that they came to believe their own confessions.

Locke's theory of the mind's immunity to coercion has no conception of psychological pressures, let alone the unfathomably complex pressures acting on a woman under arrest in a witch-hunt that was let loose by one of her daughters and engulfed another. Only "some time after" her judgment buckled under the impact of events did Mary Tyler, like the others, recover the belief in her innocence. At trial she pled Not Guilty and was acquitted. Her agony over betraying the truth and her own conscience suggests how deeply she was committed to a Lockean ideal she was unable to uphold.

Mary Osgood

That each of six women who were separately interrogated lost their belief in their innocence and their very footing in reality suggests that this nightmare may well have befallen many of the accused of Salem. Increase Mather reported the following of his conversation with Mary Bridges, Sr. in prison: “Goodwife Bridges said that she had confessed against herself things which were all utterly false; and that she was brought to her confession by being told that she was certainly a witch, and so made to believe it,—though she had no other grounds so to believe” (Boyer and Nissenbaum, 1977).

Even the case of Mary Tyler, complicated though it is by special circumstances, stands as representative in some respects, one of them being that she was charged not only with tormenting specific victims but with being a willing agent of the Devil. In conformity with the conventions of witch lore, Mary Tyler, so it was alleged, entered into a solemn contract to serve the Devil, presumably in return for some tempting promise on his part. In the words of the charging document, she made a covenant with the devil “wickedly, maliciously, and feloniously . . . and signed the devil’s book, and promised to serve the devil as long as she lived, and by the devil was baptized, and renounced her former baptism, by which diabolical and wicked covenant with the devil, she the said Mary Tyler is become a detestable witch” (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1977). On what evidence was Mary Tyler accused of signing the Devil’s book and undergoing a diabolical baptism? Presumably, as the Andover confessions mounted and new accusations mounted with them, someone claimed to have seen her, or else her likeness, performing these

abominations. How else could things that never happened have been cited by the magistrates?

But an equally pertinent question is, How could the accused be certain that the things alleged against them never happened? According to a petition submitted in defense of Mary Osgood and four others by their own neighbors, these women were haunted under interrogation by "fear lest Satan had someway snared them, because there was that evidence against them which then was by many thought to be a certain indication and discovery of witchcraft" (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1977). The evidence in question would seem to be none other than the dramatic reaction of their purported victims to their sight and presence, a feature of witch investigations going back at least to the celebrated Warboys case in England in the 1590's (Almond, 2004]. Throughout the transcripts of the Salem examinations, the fits of the accusers upon the entrance of the suspect into the courtroom (along with the cessation of the same as soon as the accused touched them or confessed) are specifically noted as strong evidence of guilt. These demonstrations also shook the accused; recall Margaret Jacobs' statement that the spectacle of her accusers falling to the ground at the sight of her "did very much startle and affright me." Unnerved by such performances, Mary Osgood and the others may well have feared that the tales told of them held some truth and that Satan went about in their guise; if he did so, and if he could not assume the form of an innocent person, then they were responsible. Just as Mary Tyler's brother-in-law maintained that "God would not suffer so many good men to be in such an error" about the guilt of the accused, some of the latter may well have believed that God would not allow the Devil to confuse the world by impersonating the innocent,

and that they must therefore be guilty if their likeness was seen performing a diabolical act. One way or another, their defenses against the charge of witchcraft broke down, at which point they were already perilously close to believing the delusions that were forced upon them.

In most instances, of course, we do not know how accused persons may have convinced themselves that they were guilty as charged. However, certain cases offer a proof of principle that under duress the accused had ways and means of persuading themselves of the impossible. Consider another prisoner interviewed by Increase Mather: Mary Osgood.

Where Tituba filled her confession with details that seemed credible to her interrogators because they conformed to the conventions of witch lore, Mary Osgood attempted to make the claims against her somewhat credible even to herself by adding details from her own experience. As Mather reported,

> Being asked why . . . she spake of her being baptized [that is, by the Devil], etc., about twelve years since, she replied and said that when she had owned the thing, they asked the time, to which she answered that she knew not the time. But being told that she did know the time, and must tell the time, and the like, she considered that about twelve years before (when she had her last child) she had a fit of sickness, and was melancholy; and so thought that this time might be as proper a time to mention as any, and accordingly did prefix the said time. (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1977)

Contrary to Locke's theory that we come to hold our beliefs as a result of a process as involuntary as vision, Mary Osgood works up a certain belief in the charges against her by choosing a time for her diabolical baptism corresponding to a troubled moment that stands out in her memory: the depression associated with the birth of her last child. If she had been feeding lies to her interrogators, she could have said anything, however absurd. Instead she chose a detail thar framed the sacrilege in question in a way that made sense to her, not just them. Recall that Mary Osgood put her name to the deposition explaining how, under long and abusive questioning, the signatories came to internalize the judgments of their interrogators.

Under interrogation, Tituba spoke of seeing two cats that told her to serve them and scratched her when she would not. Mary Osgood told her interrogators that the devil appeared to her in the form of a cat because, having being informed that she was a witch and that the devil had appeared to her, she remembered that she noticed a certain cat some time before her arrest, and "because some creature she must mention, this came into her mind" (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1977). Note that Mary did not simply invent a creature out of thin air; she chose a cat she encountered at a moment charged with significance. She did not fabricate a confession in all cynicism but spontaneously, and twice over, fleshed it out with real details. Possibly she hoped that a confession with such truthful touches would seem authentic to the authorities.

Personal Identity

Under extreme pressure and in fear for her life, Mary Osgood was reduced to daubing a fantastic narrative with mundane details of the sort that invite belief. Mary Tyler, also under great pressure and in a state of terror, confessed to being a witch. Both women later swore in writing that they were subjected to an interrogation so coercive that they almost lost their minds. "Our understandings, our reason, our faculties almost gone, we were not capable of judging of our condition." At this point we return to Locke.

Locke's theory of personal identity as expounded in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* allows us to see the interrogation of accused witches on the basis of spectral evidence—and this within a few years of the *Essay* itself—as an act of violence to the fabric of personal identity, It was a concentrated attack on personhood itself that reduced Mary Tyler and Mary Osgood to such desperation and bewilderment that they confessed to doing they knew not what.

According to Locke's *Essay*, the concept of "person" refers to "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking." Consciousness makes personal identity. This being so, "To punish Socrates waking for what sleeping Socrates thought, and waking Socrates was never conscious of, would be no more of right [sic] than to punish one twin for what his brother-twin did, whereof he knew nothing" (Locke, 1974). Maybe anyone but Socrates—waking Socrates, that is—would find herself "exceedingly astonished and amazed, and consternated and

affrighted," would even feel her reason slipping away, if arraigned and threatened with execution for doing something she was never conscious of.

The theory of spectral evidence, which allowed the likeness of a witch to roam the countryside and perform deeds of malice unknown to the accused herself, offered a standing affront to a concept of personal identity which Locke phrased theoretically but which many, both in old and New England, must have held in an intuitive, pre-theoretical manner. (Locke himself came of Puritan parents.) The same Mary Osgood who added realistic touches like an actual cat and an actually troubled moment in her life to her narrative of witchery also testified that she flew on a pole with several others (including Goody Tyler) to a certain local pond where she underwent a parody of baptism. The story is as impossible as if it put its author in two places at the same time.

The transcripts of the Salem examinations are filled with such fantasies, many of which violate the elementary principle that consciousness makes identity. Mary Osgood could not possibly have been conscious of riding on a pole, but could have believed that she must have ridden on a pole (even though lacking all memory of it), because pole-riding goes along with being a witch in the Salem imagination and she had been convinced she was a witch. The inquisitors of Salem were bent on punishing Socrates "for what his brother-twin did, whereof he knew nothing." We cannot begin to fathom the horror that overwhelmed Mary Tyler, Mary Osgood and the other signers of their common deposition without appreciating that their examiners ripped apart the very concept of a person.

Vulnerability to Coercion

As we know, Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration* asserts early on and in the strongest terms that belief cannot be compelled, as if this were the foundation of all the argumentation to come. And yet belief can be compelled. "They were telling us that we were witches, and they knew it, and we knew it, which made us think that it was so." But it is hard to see why a case for toleration should depend on the mind's invulnerability to coercion. The unhappy fact that people can be forced to believe impossibilities does not mean that the authorities have a right to do this. On the contrary: if belief can be enforced, but only by reducing people to such helplessness that they hardly know which way is up—the state into which Mary Tyler and others were thrown—then we have a strong argument against the enforcement of belief.

A good case for toleration, simply on the grounds of the unconscionable cruelty of intolerance, is made in the prologue of the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, even before Locke gets down to the work of constructing a theory. "I appeal to the consciences of those that persecute, torment, destroy, and kill other men upon pretense of religion, whether they do it out of friendship and kindness toward them or not?" (Locke, 1955). But unconscionable cruelty extends to mental torture as well. Arrested as witches, Mary Tyler, Mary Osgood and others were browbeaten into confessing to things as preposterous as flying to a rendezvous with the Devil. Even if such a confession were to buy immunity from execution (the madness of the Salem witch-hunt was brought to a halt before that question could be put to the test), the magistrate surely has no right to assault the very reason of those subject to his power.

If the mind is not in fact the inner sanctum envisioned by Locke—if power can violate our reason, pervert conscience, fracture identity, compel belief—then the case for protecting us from such abuses grows more urgent, not less. Toleration is essential not because we are ultimately invulnerable to coercion but because we are dangerously vulnerable to it. Under coercion, Mary Osgood (who, like Mary Tyler, was ultimately acquitted) became such a travesty of herself that she confessed to and even to some extent believed fictions she herself would have deemed outrageous in any other circumstance. Nor do we have any reason to assume that there was something about the women of New England that left them peculiarly defenseless to the assaults of their interrogators.

I have chosen examples of coerced belief from the Salem witch-hunt because it occurred so close to the composition of the *Letter Concerning Toleration*, not because all known cases are confined to it. Regarding the European witch-trials of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, H. R. Trevor-Roper found that "For every victim whose story is created or improved by torture, there are two or three who genuinely believe in its truth" (Trevor-Roper, 1956). Believers in false confessions die out with witch hysteria, either. The state of extremity in which Mary Tyler, Mary Osgood and the others were "incapable of making our defence" and ready to say and believe anything resembles the state in which suspects have been known to give false confessions under abusive questioning at the hands of police even today.

In a notorious 1997 case, each of four men in Norfolk, Virginia against whom there was no evidence whatsoever confessed falsely to rape and murder after being subjected to

highly coercive interrogation. Deprived of sleep, broken mentally, fed details of the crime, made to alter their stories repeatedly, and in at least one instance told that if they could not remember the crime they were simply repressing the memory of it (Leo & Davis, 2010; Wells & Leo, 2008), the men seem to have been convinced, like many in Salem, that they could escape the death penalty if only they confessed. Reminded emphatically that he faced a charge of capital murder, the first suspect interrogated and the first to confess falsely, Danial Williams, gave in after almost twelve hours of questioning. "He later reported that he was exhausted, confused, not feeling well, and finally just couldn't take the pressure anymore as he came to believe that he might actually have committed the crime" (Leo & Davis, 2010). It was as if this sailor had become one of the Salem confessors, a number of whom evidently believed that they might actually have committed the crimes they were charged with because their accusers suffered at the sight of them, men of authority declared them guilty, friends and relatives exhorted them to confess, and Satan might or might not be able to impersonate an innocent.

The most hapless of the Norfolk Four, Williams' roommate Joseph Dick, was actually aboard the *USS Saipan* at the time of the crime (Berlow, 2007). Just as accused witches in New England found it possible to imagine that their likeness was in one place while they were in another, Joseph Dick somehow persuaded himself that he committed rape and murder on land while he was at sea. And his belief in his guilt persisted long enough for him to testify against the other three with no consciousness of perjury. His claim that "I believed what I was saying [on the witness stand] was true" (Berlow, 2007) may seem incredible to those who presume with Locke that belief cannot be compelled.

But perhaps the locus classicus of compelled belief in the twentieth century is thought-reform, colloquially known as brainwashing: a coercive interrogation that goes on for weeks and months, all in a determined effort to wire a new set of political beliefs into the captive's brain. In Robert Jay Lifton's classic *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism* (1961), based on interviews with survivors in Hong Kong, the dynamics of this process of extended torture are analyzed with notable subtlety. Where many in Salem undoubtedly believed that they had to confess to save their lives, and where the Norfolk Four were given to understand that they could escape the death penalty only by confession, the former captives who met with Lifton had been immersed in the message that "only those who confess can survive" (Lifton, 1961). Instead of producing cynical fabrications, the imperative to confess seems to have led them to invest belief in their narratives. At some point the confessor became "the receptive criminal: the man who is, at whatever level of consciousness, not only beginning to concur in the environment's legal and moral judgment of him, but also to commit himself to acquiring the beliefs, values, and identities officially considered desirable" (Lifton, 1961). Under pressure, and in defiance of Locke, the receptive prisoner acquired the requisite beliefs.

Captive and Community

For the captive undergoing thought-reform, a critical step in the process of assimilating such beliefs is separation from others. Writes Lifton:

> A consistent feature of all the cases discussed so far has been the isolation of the Western prisoner. Even when physically part of a cell group, he was completely removed from it—emotionally, culturally, and ideologically—until he “changed” and adopted its standards. Never did the group support him as an individual, or help him to resist the onslaught of thought reform; rather, the group was the agent of thought reform, the conveyor of its message. (Lifton, 1961)

Removal from the community leaves the individual bereft and vulnerable. The breakdown of the defenses of each of the Norfolk Four began, accordingly, with their confinement for hours on end in a room where nothing and no one stood between them and a menacing interrogator absolutely convinced of their guilt and bent on getting a confession. The process of wearing them down—reducing them to a state of utter moral and mental exhaustion—bears an unmistakable resemblance to the ordeal visited on many of the accused of New England, notably including Mary Tyler and Mary Osgood. The state of desperation to which these women were reduced began with their removal from a community more closely knit than we today can readily imagine—so closely, indeed, that Mary Tyler’s brother-in-law acted as her interrogator. In Andover, where the rule of deference to the community was especially strong (Norton, 2003), severance from the community was punishing in itself.

Precisely because Andover was a tight community, the town itself felt the loss of residents imprisoned as witches. In the aforementioned petition to the court in Salem, dozens of residents of Andover came to the support of Mary Osgood and four others. The

petitioners, some of whom actually witnessed the pressure-tactics used against the women, knew the story of the coerced confessions in detail and also knew that the women soon retracted them in their entirety. However, from this fact the petitioners drew the dubious inference that the accused never believed them in the first place. **"**Had what they said against themselves proceeded from conviction of the fact, we should have had nothing to have said [sic] for them, but we are induced to think that it did not, because they did soon privately retract what they had said" (Boyer & Nissenbaum, 1977). The community would sooner excuse the grave sin of perjury than concede that the five ever came to believe their own lies.

Although four of the five were signatories of the very deposition explaining how they came to credit the accusations against them, the Andover petitioners appear to regard these women as living illustrations of the principle that "such is the nature of the understanding that it cannot be compelled to the belief of anything by outward force." Would that Locke were right. The truth seems to be that the immunity he envisions is an illusion that can be maintained only by excluding all evidence to the contrary.

2023

---

[1] The name given by the editors is "Martha" Tyler, but they elsewhere refer to her as Mary: 917-18, 971-72. See also Norton, *In the Devil's Snare*, 262, 399.

References

Almond, P. (2004). *Demonic possession and exorcism in early modern England*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Berlow, A. (2007). What happened in Norfolk? New York Times Magazine, Aug. 19.

Boyer, P. and Nissenbaum, S. (1977). The Salem witchcraft papers: verbatim transcripts of the legal documents of the Salem witchcraft outbreak of 1692. New York: Da Capo.

Burr, G. L., ed. (1914). *Narratives of witchcraft cases, 1648-1706*. New York: Scribner's Sons.

Craker, W. (1997). Spectral evidence, non-Spectral acts of witchcraft, and confession at Salem in 1692. *The Historical Journal* 40, 2, 331-58.

Leo, R. and Davis, D. (2010). From false confession to wrongful conviction: seven psychological processes. Journal of psychiatry and law, 38, 1-2, 9-56.

Lifton, R. J. (1961). *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*. New York: Norton.

Locke, J. (1955). *A letter concerning toleration*. Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts.

Locke, J. (1974). *An essay concerning human understanding*. New York: Meridian.

Norton, M. B. (2003). *In the devil's snare: the Salem witchcraft crisis of 1692*. New York: Knopf.

Rosenthal, B. (1993). *Salem story: reading the witch trials of 1692*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Trevor-Roper, H. R. (1956). *The European Witch-Craze of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*. New York: Harper and Row.

Wells, T. and Leo, R. (2008). *The wrong guys: murder, false confessions, and the Norfolk Four*. New York: Norton.