



FREETHOUGHT DAY, WEEK, MONTH

Sometime in the early 1990's, through the efforts of two members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), David Schreiber and the late Catherine Fahringer, October 12th as Freethought Day was born. Due to Fahringer's efforts, the Mayor of San Antonio proclaimed the week of October 8-15th 1994 "Freethought Week." The governors of Texas and Missouri, as well as the mayors of a number of other cities, including Philadelphia, Madison, Baltimore, St. Louis, Cincinnati, and Portland issued similar proclamations.

But what is Freethought Day? The birthday of the atheist patron saint? Of Darwin, of Galileo or James Madison or someone else dear to rationalists, humanists and supporters of state-church separation? No, it's none of these. According to the FFRF, Schreiber proposed the date because it is the "anniversary of the cessation of the Salem witchcraft trials, by edict of Governor William Phips, who declared 'spectral evidence' no longer admissible in court."

It turns out that it's even more interesting than this, in part because the Salem witchcraft trials, as historian Mary Beth Norton put it, "have so fascinated modern residents of the United States" and "have been so intensively studied by historians." Still, Norton notes in her own book on the subject, *In The Devil's Snare*, "much of the complicated Salem story remains untold." Indeed, many things commonly supposed about the events are wrong. For example, no one was burned at the stake. And there is little evidence that the episode was caused by an outbreak of ergotism, poisoning from ergot, a mold affecting cereal crops. Other biological explanations seem as unlikely. None of those accused, convicted or executed were Wiccans, either, as has been claimed by some, so the episode was not an instance of religious persecution.

The basic facts are not in dispute. In mid-January of 1692, two young girls in the household of the Samuel Parris, minister of Salem Village, began acting strangely. The physician called to examine them, and others, attributed their behavior to witchcraft. When additional and older girls, some actually young adults, came forward charging witchcraft, the authorities began investigations. Their interrogations, and the trials that followed, were a travesty of justice. At least 144 people, including 38 males, were swept up in the hysteria. 54 admitted guilt. By the time it was over, 14 women and 5 men, including the former minister of Salem Village, had been hung. Another was crushed to death under stones, and 3 women, a man, and several infants died in jail.

But how did it end? Why did it end? That is the reason for Freethought Day. On October 12th of 1692, the Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Sir William Phips, wrote the British Crown, then King William and Queen Mary. After describing briefly the proceedings that began in March and the hangings, crowded jails, and growing controversy and hysteria, Phips complained of:

"the Persons who have made soe ill improvement of these matters here are seeking to turne it all upon mee, but I hereby declare that as soon as I came from fighting against their Majesties Enemyes and understood what danger some of their innocent subjects might be exposed to, if the evidence of the afflicted perosns only did previle either to the committing or trying of any of them, I did before any application was made unto me about it put a stop to the proceedings of the court and they are now stopt till their Majesties pleasure be known. Sir I beg pardon for giving you all this trouble, the reason is because I know my enemies are seeking to turn it all upon me and I take this liberty because I depend upon your firendship, and desire you will please to give a true understanding of the matter if any thing of this kind be urged or mage to use of against mee."

There is no surviving document of any "edict" or other order explicitly prohibiting the use of "spectral evidence." But we see here that there was a clear recognition that "the evidence of the afflicted persons" – that is, "spectral evidence" – evidence that only the accusers could perceive – was a danger. True, some of this concern was related to the Puritans' theological beliefs about "Satan." Specifically, they were uncertain as to whether "Satan" could appear to the afflicted in the guise of innocent people and especially innocent members of their congregations. Nevertheless, "spectral evidence" was seen as a problem and the witchcraft hysteria that began in Salem Village and spread into the rest of Essex County and beyond in 1692 drew attention to this problem as never before. It is not too much to say that the episode contributed significantly to American jurisprudence and especially to the legal concept of "the reasonable

person" which has become the standard by which every-one is judged in a court of law.

This, in turn, is related to what may be said to be the central principle of Freethought, British mathematician and philosopher W.K. Clifford's observation – and so sometimes called Clifford's Maxim or Clifford's Creed – that:

"It is wrong, everywhere, always, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

Freethought Day, October 12th, which happens also to be Columbus Day, celebrates a small but still a very significant step along humanity's progress towards a better reliance of facts and reason. If we knew when people stopped being punished for hurting others in their dreams – which was a common practice among primitive peoples – we could celebrate that. But excluding "spectral evidence" from "sufficient evidence" is pretty close.

We needn't be fanatical about Freethought Day, Freethought Week, or October being Freethought Month. It's not a "high holy day" or a "sacrament" without which we will go to some place of punishment. But it's worth remembering – it's important to remember – the steps that have had to be taken along the way to a greater reliance on facts and reason that we enjoy today.

Freethought Day should also get us thinking about what it is about traditional religions that deserve criticism and what authentic religion is or ought to be. Religion should not be an alternative way to make sense of the objective world that we all share. It is not "another way of knowing" that rivals, much less trumps facts and reason.

Religion should be about achieving an inner appreciation and an individual sense of the meaning of the subjective, the private, and the personal aspects of the human condition. Of course, this could include "spectral evidence," though it would probably be wise to first try some antipsychotic medication for that sort of affliction..

"Self-justification is more powerful and more dangerous than the explicit lie. It allows people to convince themselves that what they did was the best thing ... Self-justification not only minimizes our mistakes and bad decisions; it is also the reason that everyone can see a hypocrite in action except the hypocrite. "

- Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson
in *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)* Harcourt, Inc, 2007, page 4

COMING NEXT MONTH:

"THANK PEOPLE!"

November 6th, 2011

**SHERATON GRAND DFW AIRPORT
SE CORNER OF 114 AND ESTERS**

**All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar (yes, website update is in process thanks to Sarah and Rusty Nejd!), or through our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: - www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought -
JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!**

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

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

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

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

**YOUR GENEROUS DONATIONS
TO THE NTCOF ARE NEEDED,
APPRECIATED,
AND TAX-DEDUCTIBLE!!**



DFWCOR

Dallas-Fort Worth Coalition of Reason

The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers

Presenters: David Burgess, Tim Gorski
& Nilgun Sezgin
Music: David Burgess
And check out faithlesscompanions.com !!!
Welcome Coordinator: Mark Barnick
Videographer: John Gauthier
Minister: Dr. Tim Gorski

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