

Societal Reflections

How an Article on the Salem Witch Trials Reflects Antebellum America

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It is true, history does repeat itself, as cliché as that may sound. Humans are constantly repeating themselves throughout history, and American history is no different. The same ideas, opinions, and views can be seen in many different periods of history. At the time of the Salem Witch Trials, North America was just beginning to be colonized by Europeans, and it was a time of new ideas, power seeking, and repression. Similarly, Antebellum America was also full of new ideas on power and rights, and people were starting to speak out and rebel against societal norms and repression. “The Salem Witchcraft” is an article published by *The American Whig Review* in 1846, about the famous witch trials in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692, written as a historical piece documenting the moral and philosophical causes of the hysteria.¹ The society of 1846 is revealed by the editors of *The American Whig Review* in how they chose to write about the Salem Witch Trials, demonstrating a strong Christian society, with a focus on change in the Northern States. It is also illustrated that women in Antebellum America were seen as victims of society, just as the women in Salem were seen as victims of witchcraft. And the men in 1846 saw women as childlike and second-class citizens. Throughout history, religion has been a major part of the human experience, sometimes more prominently than others. Religion played an important role in both of these time periods, with the dominant religion being Christianity.

¹ “The Salem Witchcraft,” *The American Whig Review* 03-01 (January 1846): 60-67 [journal online]; available from <http://digital.library.cornell.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=amwh;cc=amwh;rgn=full%20text;idno=amwh0003-1;didno=amwh0003-1;view=image;seq=0072;node=amwh0003-1%3A8>; Internet; accessed 5 September 2010.

The United States was in part founded as a place for people to escape from the religious persecution they were experiencing in Europe. It was not intended as a sanctuary for everyone however, just for those who had chosen the righteous path of the Puritans. Making a religious choice was important to Americans in 1846 as well, who chose to be born again evangelicals. To be born again meant you had to choose to make a public conversion and you had to stick your religious morals.² The way Christians and Christianity are portrayed in the article from 1846, “The Salem Witchcraft”, proves that in 1846 the United States was a very religious nation, dominated by Christianity. Christianity is written about somewhat casually in “The Salem Witchcraft”, with the assumption that the readers will of course be Christian themselves. Whenever the editors of *The American Whig Review* refer to Christianity, they do so with positive terms, and pious Christians receive the most praise. One such prominent Christian was Cotton Mather, a clergyman that played a role in the Salem witch trials of 1692. He was also an author and wrote many books, including *Memorable Providences* written in 1689. This was an account of the examination and trial of an accused witch in Boston named Mary Glover. It was a well-known published piece, and the people in Salem would have read it, which may have influenced the hysteria.³ Mather was inconsistent in his opinions as well. He at first spoke out against the use of spectral evidence during the trials.⁴ Spectral evidence was evidence collected from the accusers, who were assumed to be in possession of a second sight, letting them see the specter, or essence, of an accused witch. When that person was then accused of attacking

² Lillian Marrujo-Duck, “Early United States History” (Lecture, City College of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, 2 December 2010).

³ Salem Witch Trials, Discovery Education [website]; available from <http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schooladventures/salemwitchtrials/people/mather.html>; Internet; accessed 17 October 2010.

⁴ “Cotton Mather,” in *Encyclopedia Americana* (Connecticut: Grolier, 1829): 503-504.

someone, it was their specter that did the attacking, and only the accusers could see it.⁵ Mather later defended the judges for including spectral evidence in the proceedings.⁶ When describing in detail his character, the 1846 article states, “Cotton Mather, with many eccentricities, was truly a man of high intellectual endowments. It is not extravagant to say, that he was essentially a man of genius.”⁷ The editors of this article praise Cotton Mather, a Christian clergyman, even though he played a detrimental part in the Salem trials. In contrast, the one time another religion is mentioned in the 1846 article, that being the religion of Tituba, Pastor Parris’s slave woman, and the first person to confess to being a witch, it is described as “a credulous superstition to which the religion of her tribe predisposed her...”⁸ This insinuates that her unnamed religion is a gullible religion. Although the 1846 article does later explain that the Puritan religion was also known for superstition, Tituba’s religion comes across here in a negative way.

The article also details Mather’s more outrageous side, saying,

“He had strong local attachments, strong feelings, strong prejudices. You might call him an opinionated man, and perhaps he was a good deal inclined to be dogmatical (sic)...Possibly, if we follow Isaac Taylor’s definition of the word, he might have been a fanatic.”⁹

The 1846 equivalent to Mather could arguably be Charles Grandison Finney, one of the first evangelists. Finney became a minister in 1821, and he was known for holding very spirited

⁵ Wendel D. Craker, “Spectral Evidence, Non-Spectral Acts of Witchcraft, and Confession at Salem in 1692,” *The Historical Journal* 40, no.2 (Jun., 1997): 331-358 [journal on-line]; available from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2640070> ; Internet; accessed 17 October 2010.

⁶ “Cotton Mather,” 503-504.

⁷ “The Salem Witchcraft,” 64.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 64.

revivals.¹⁰ Evangelists were, and are still, known for their emotional and physically active tent revivals, and their strong religious beliefs. The movement came out of the Second Great Awakening of the 1820's and 30's, and focused on converting people to Christianity, the second coming of Christ, and ridding the nation of sin. The United States would become the most evangelical Christian nation in the world by the year 1815.¹¹ Both Mather and Finney were fanatics in their religious leadership and both were very influential in their time.

Another example of the strong Christian foundation of the U.S. in 1846 is in the portrayal of the Puritans. "The Salem Witchcraft" from 1846 describes Puritans as being humble and oppressed. "The Puritans were a humble dissenting people, who had thrown off the oppressive burdens of tithes, and ecclesiastical monopolies, and left the land where they were born..."¹² Describing the Puritans in such a way, while ignoring the religious intolerance they exhibited to others at the time, sets a precedent for how people of other religions would be treated in the 1800's. In the 1830's a large number of immigrants were arriving from Europe, from places like Ireland and Germany. The Irish in particular immigrated in large numbers, and brought their Roman Catholicism with them. The Protestant Christians did not want Catholics in their country, and many businesses would make it a point to exclude any Irish person from employment.¹³ Protestant Christianity was the reigning religion, and anything that threatened it

¹⁰ "Charles Grandison Finney," in *Encyclopedia Britannica* [on-line]; available from <http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/EBchecked/topic/207585/Charles-Grandison-Finney>; Internet; accessed 4 November 2010.

¹¹ Lillian Marrujo-Duck, "Early United States History" (Lecture, City College of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, 18 November 2010).

¹² "The Salem Witchcraft," 66.

¹³ Jacqueline Jones et al., *Created Equal A History of the United States* (New York: Longman Pub Group, 2009), 362-363.

was to be feared. It was also thought that the Catholics, who were loyal to the Pope, would oppose American democracy and compromise the United States political system.¹⁴

Lastly, the editors of the 1846 article, “The Salem Witchcraft”, hold strong to the concept of Christianity being a forgiving and charitable religion. The 1846 article references one of the accused witches, Mary Easty, and her letter to the judges telling them they are making a mistake in convicting her, and that she hopes no more innocent people will be executed, although she understands that she must face the noose. The author of the 1846 article states his feelings on this as, “What a beautiful example of the great law of Christian forgiveness, yet what an awful, unanswerable rebuke!”¹⁵ The notion of Christian forgiveness is an old one, and a reoccurring theme in Christian doctrine. There is a prayer in the Bible, The Lord’s Prayer, and it includes the line “And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”¹⁶ Christian forgiveness was important to the author of the 1846 article, evident in the emotion he puts behind his above quote. In 1846, Christianity is the foundation that society is built on, but some aspects of that foundation will be shaken, due to massive movements of change in the Northern states.

The Northern and Southern United States always had significant societal differences, even when they were colonies. The Massachusetts Bay Colony and the Jamestown Colony were both founded with different desires in mind, with different types of people, and with different values. Even as they united in the founding of the United States of America, those differences remained. Action and change were happening in the north, and in choosing to write an article

¹⁴ Ibid., 378-379.

¹⁵ “The Salem Witchcraft,” 63.

¹⁶ “Lord’s Prayer,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica* [on-line]; available from <http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/EBchecked/topic/348087/Lords-Prayer>; Internet; accessed 4 November 2010.

about events in Massachusetts, *The American Whig Review* focused attention northward and on the reform movements happening there.

The fact that the 1846 article, “The Salem Witchcraft”, was published in *The American Whig Review*, which was based out of New York, gives weight to the north being the center for change. It was a political magazine created by the Whig Party of the United States.¹⁷ The Whig party focused on national development but were divided in their own party based on geographical location and their views on slavery. One faction, the Conscience Whigs, were antislavery with the other faction, the Cotton Whigs, being proslavery.¹⁸ National development was an idea more strongly held in the north, because it benefited northern states more, and the south saw anything that benefited the north as a detriment to slavery.¹⁹

In the 1846 article, “The Salem Witchcraft”, the author makes the statement that; “It was a period among the darkest that ever had threatened the white population of New England with total destruction.”²⁰ There had been tension between new white colonists and the native Indians, sparking wars and negative feelings towards each other. Metacom’s War was the result of such tensions, with the Native Americans angry about Europeans destroying their crops. In 1675 Metacom’s people almost destroyed Massachusetts Bay, and after the war the English wanted to

¹⁷ James D. Hart and Phillip W. Leininger, "American Whig Review," in *The Oxford Companion to American Literature* [on-line]; available from <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O123-AmericanWhigReview.html>; Internet; accessed 18 October 2010.

¹⁸ "Whig Party," in *Encyclopedia Britannica* [on-line]; available from <http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/EBchecked/topic/641788/Whig-Party>; Internet; accessed 18 October 2010.

¹⁹ Lillian Marrujo-Duck, “Early United States History” (Lecture, City College of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, 11 November 2010).

²⁰ “The Salem Witchcraft,” 65.

wipe out all the Indians in New England.²¹ Tensions between whites and non-whites were strong in both eras. In 1846, just as in 1692, being white in United States society granted a person far more privileges than being African American or Native American, even in the more liberal Northern states. Discrimination existed even within the Caucasian demographic, specifically immigrants from Western Europe. If you were a wealthier immigrant, you could move west, buy some land, and make your living farming. There were many others though, mostly from Ireland, who were too poor to move farther west so they stayed at the coast and competed with the freed slaves for low paying jobs.²² The people of New England were just beginning to experience this wave of Irish immigrants in 1846. Change was happening in the North, whether they wanted it or not.

When Massachusetts was established as a colony in the North, it was founded on the idea of wanting a change in religion, and taking action to make that change. The Puritans who moved to Massachusetts Bay to escape from the Church of England, created America's first Congregational Church in Salem.²³ Massachusetts is where most of the Puritans arrived from England when they moved to the New World, increasing the differences between Massachusetts Bay in the North and Jamestown in the South, which was founded under the banner of mercantilism.²⁴ When writing about their New England ancestors, the author of "The Salem

²¹ Lillian Marrujo-Duck, "Early United States History" (Lecture, City College of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, 21 September 2010).

²² Jones et al, *Created*, 362-363

²³ "Salem, Massachusetts," in *Encyclopedia Britannica* [on-line]; available from <http://www.britannica.com.ezproxy.sfpl.org/EBchecked/topic/519047/Salem>; Internet; accessed 11 October 2010.

²⁴ Lillian Marrujo-Duck, "Early United States History" (Lecture, City College of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, 31 August 2010).

Witchcraft” reflects the new movement of change, the New England Reformers. The 1846 article makes a note, when talking about the errors the people of Salem made during the trials of 1692,

“To the honor of New England men be it said, that they did what no other people have ever done: as soon as they saw their error, they made such atonement as they could, by asking the forgiveness of the sufferers, and by humbling themselves in fasting and prayer, at the feet of that Providence whom they had unwittingly offended.”²⁵

This sentiment could also be said of the New England reformers in 1846, specifically their attitude towards slavery. The *Liberator*, an emancipation newspaper out of Boston created by William Lloyd Garrison, began publication in 1831, and the abolition movement started receiving support from both African Americans and Whites in the formation of the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1833.²⁶ Martha Coffin Wright wrote abolitionists letters to the *Liberator* along with other newspapers, and set up her home in New York as a stop on the Underground Railroad. The Underground Railroad was not an actual railroad, but a network of people in the North who would help Native Americans held in slavery escape their bonds and find freedom in the Northern States, Canada, and sometimes South to Mexico and the Bahamas.²⁷ Born in Boston to a family of Quakers, Wright’s religion opposed slavery early on, and she held anti-slavery beliefs from childhood.²⁸

²⁵ “The Salem Witchcraft,” 67.

²⁶ Jones et al, *Created*, 376.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 410.

²⁸ Sherry H. Penney and James D. Livingston, "Lessons about Reform from ‘A Very Dangerous Woman’," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 20, no. 2 (2005): 105-121, *Business Source Premier*, EBSCOhost; Internet; accessed 20 November 2010.

Education was also a major focus of reform in the North in 1846. The idea of a common school system for all boys and girls was the brainchild of a Massachusetts lawyer, Horace Mann.²⁹ People in the North had started to see the value of having a common school system in place so that the families who were moving from one part of the country to another could continue their children's education uninterrupted.³⁰ Public schools were run on community support, and the number of children, mostly white, that attended public school was much greater in the north, where the reformers were located, because they had the funds and the ambition to make it work. In the south, public schools were not popular and did not receive adequate funds to keep them running, and as a consequence there were many more illiterate white children, and slaves were legally forbidden from learning to read and write.³¹ The popular view on education in the South was that it led to social unrest, and with a large portion of their population being held in slavery, the South was always trying to avoid social unrest.³² A strong push towards public education was clearly evident in the North, contrasted by views on education in the south.

The woman's reform movement also began in the North, with many women seeing similarities between themselves and slaves held in service. Neither group could own property, attain higher education, or become religious leaders.³³ Women in 1846 admittedly had many more privileges than slaves did, but in many legal situations they were the property of the men in their life, either their husbands, fathers, or other male relatives. Many women spoke out for

²⁹ Jones et al, *Created*, 380.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 381.

³² Lillian Marrujo-Duck, "Early United States History" (Lecture, City College of San Francisco, San Francisco, CA, 30 November 2010).

³³ Jones et al, *Created*, 383

woman's rights, notably Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, Martha Coffin Wright, and Susan B. Anthony. In the 1830's women began to make some progress and win some small battles. For example, New York, Pennsylvania, and Mississippi all passed laws protecting property rights for married women.³⁴ Support for most major reform movements was centralized in the Northern states in 1846. The year 1846 was a period of major change, from immigrants moving in to reform movements to abolitionism. The preceding years had shown a build up of new thoughts and ideas, and people were working for change. Some of the biggest proponents for change were women.

Northern women in 1846 were ready to take action for change in their society. They were tired of the societal differences they saw and experienced everyday, and they wanted to be active participants in politics. The way women are referred to in "The Salem Witchcraft", and the women included and excluded in the 1846 article, reflect the author's ideas that women in 1846 were still seen as victims, they were childlike, and they held second-class citizen status. The women included in the 1846 article, "The Salem Witchcraft", were always described as being victims, and the women accused of witchcraft that the author chooses to point out were all upstanding members of the community; he leaves out the other women, also accused of witchcraft, but who were of lower status. This reinforces women's second-class citizen status. Although all the accusers were female, and many of them old enough to be thought of as women, the author always refers to them as children. The opinion of women in 1692 as well as in 1846 was that women were childlike in nature.

³⁴ Ibid., 384.

“The Salem Witchcraft” article of 1846 mentions many women, most of them accused and convicted of witchcraft, either during the Salem trials of 1692 or at other witch-hunts in history. Most of the women from Salem included in this article were all upstanding, proper women, and the women the author leaves out were the lower class, poor, and disliked, who were more vocal and stronger in their denial of witchcraft. The article refers to Rebecca Nurse as “an unfortunate old woman, [who] was arraigned for this crime; but the jury did not think the evidence sufficient to commit her, and brought in a verdict of ‘Not Guilty’.”³⁵ She was later retried and found to be guilty, after she was misunderstood in court and had too poor of hearing to correct herself.³⁶ The image of women as victims of wrongdoing is strong in this example. Another example of women as victims comes from the account of Mrs. Mary Easty. She is described by the author as being, “...of good family, and possessed of a gentle, amiable spirit, united to a firmness that would allow her to sacrifice anything sooner than integrity of conscience.”³⁷ Her character is praised further, and she is portrayed as being a wonderful woman who was the victim of a horrible crime, made even worse because she was a woman. There were many other women, and men, accused and convicted of witchcraft during the Salem trials, but there are not many of them included in this account, which hints at what traits the author wanted to emphasize in women and which ones he wanted to hide. One of these women was Sarah Good. Mrs. Good was a beggar woman, who smoked a pipe and looked about seventy years old, but she was actually still in her childbearing years. She was disliked in Salem and it

³⁵ “The Salem Witchcraft,” 62.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 63.

was not a surprise she was accused of being a witch.³⁸ Even though she was one of the first three women to be accused, a significant role and worthy of mention, she is not included in this article. The author only included women with positive natures that could be seen with more compassion as victims by the people in 1846.

There were other women included in the 1846 article that were not part of the Salem trials, but they were parts of other witch trials in England. Amy Roberts and Rose Callender, also known as Amy Denny and Rose Cullender, were two elderly women in England who were accused and convicted of witchcraft in 1662.³⁹ They were weak women with poor standing in the community, which may have influenced their being called out as witches. The Witches of Warbois were a family accused of witchcraft in England, the accusations and trial lasting from 1589 to 1593. They were a poor family accused by their wealthy neighbors, and they were tormented so much by their accusers that they eventually confessed to being witches and all three were hung.⁴⁰ Again, by choosing these cases as examples, the author of the 1846 article is showing women as being victimized.

The attitude of the author of the 1846 article towards women can be seen reflected in women of the abolitionist and women's rights movements of the 1840's. Some of the more well known women who spoke out at this time were Sara and Angelina Grimké, sister who supported

³⁸ Marion L. Starkey, *The Devil in Massachusetts* (New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1969), 49-50.

³⁹ William W. Coventry, *Demonic Possession on Trial: Case Studies in Early Modern England and Colonial America, 1593-1692* (IUniverse, 2003), Ch. 5 [book on-line]; available from <http://mythofdesire.tripod.com/possession/id18.htm>; Internet; accessed 15 October 2010.

⁴⁰ William W. Coventry, "Possession And The Courts, 1593-1692: Salem in Context," Ch. 3 [paper on-line]; available from <http://wcoventry0.tripod.com/id34.htm>; Internet; accessed 16 October 2010.

abolition and women's rights. They were known to give talks in front of mixed-race and mixed-gender audiences, which was frowned upon at the time.⁴¹ Women who spoke out and were strong willed offended many men in Antebellum America. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was an active participant in the Woman's Right's movement. Stanton traveled to London to attend the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840, and while women were allowed to attend, they were secluded to a balcony and they could not participate in the formal debates and deliberations.⁴² Women were not recognized by men as having equal intelligence, they were seen as weaker intellectually, so they were excluded from participating in politics and international affairs. Another activist was Martha Coffin Wright. She was a women's rights reformer, abolitionist, and sister to Lucretia Mott, a female Quaker preacher who spoke out about abolition. Wright challenged social standings by hosting visiting African Americans and inviting them to eat at her table, among other things. This caused her neighbors to refer to her as "a very dangerous woman."⁴³ Wright grew up with a good example of a strong woman in her mother, Anna. Her father was a ship captain, and was often away from home for long periods of time, so her mother ran the household and even brought in money from running a shop. When her father died, her mother continued running the shop and was able to pay off her husband's debts.⁴⁴ Having such a strong role model growing up helped Wright become a strong activist. The perception of women as victims and weak was wide spread in America, but it was not true.

⁴¹ Jones et al, *Created*, 376

⁴² *Ibid.*, 383.

⁴³ Penney and Livingston, "Lessons," 108.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

Women were also seen as childlike, both in 1692 and in 1846. The author of the 1846 article, “The Salem Witchcraft”, when referring to the accusers and bewitched persons at the Salem trials of 1692, always called them “children” and says, “Other children, finding how well their little playmates had succeeded, and into what a delightful notoriety they had brought themselves, now came forward to sustain the charge.”⁴⁵ It is unfair and inaccurate to label all the accusers as children. While the first two to be bewitched were young, ages nine and eleven, many of the others to join the accusing circle were older. Mary Walcott and Elizabeth Booth were both sixteen, Elizabeth Hubbard was seventeen, Susanna Sheldon was eighteen, and Sarah Churchill and Mary Warren were both twenty years old.⁴⁶ These young women were too old to be considered children anymore, yet the author still calls them by that title. The author of the 1846 article also goes on to say, regarding the spread of bewitchment among the accusers,

“After some roguish boy or playful girl had one commenced the excitement, other children would believe what their less credulous neighbor had feigned, and terrified by the fears of their parents, perhaps, or vexed with troublesome dreams, or frightened at the sight of a black-plumaged bird, would fancy that the very air was filled with imps, that were working the will of some neighbor witch.”⁴⁷

This language makes those young women, who became accusers after the first two children did, come across as very young, naïve, scared, and very childlike in demeanor and thought.

Many women in the reform movements of the 1840’s were also perceived as childlike, along with all African Americans of either gender. Martha Coffin Wright was a strong and smart woman, who had a strong and smart role model growing up, but her husband didn’t agree or support her ideas of woman’s rights. In 1846 she had a conversation with her husband about

⁴⁵ “The Salem Witchcraft,” 61.

⁴⁶ Starkey, *The Devil*, 34-36.

⁴⁷ “The Salem Witchcraft,” 65.

the wages for men and women, which she wrote to her sister about. He disagreed with her ideas of equal rights for woman, and would dismiss her ideas as nonsense.⁴⁸ Nonsense is a word usually attributed to childlike behavior, and her husband using it in conversation with her conveys his ideas of her being naive in thought and childlike herself. This is also how white men viewed all African Americans, regardless of gender. White men thought that all black people, along with women, were intelligently inferior, undeserving of U.S. citizenship. They were only good for manual labor and household chores.⁴⁹ Women in 1846 were not given equal footing with men, they were excluded from politics and debate, and they were seen as no better than children.

The way the author of the 1846 article, “The Salem Witchcraft”, and the editors of *The American Whig Review* portray the events of the Salem Witch Trials of 1692, the wording they use and the facts they include and exclude, gives a glimpse into the society they are writing from, Antebellum America in the year 1846. This glimpse shows a very religious nation, with Christianity dominating. It also shows us the changes going on in the country and how they were centered in the northern states. Lastly, they illustrate the idea that women were seen as victims and childlike, not deserving of citizenship status. Although hundreds of years have passed since the Salem Witch trials in 1692, and only a little less time since the reform period in 1846, today’s society can still learn from the ideas and views expressed back then. We have progressed far enough as a country to have elected our first black president in United States history, and yet not all people are given the same legal rights as their neighbor. In most states you cannot marry someone if they are the same sex as you, and discrimination of lesbian, gay,

⁴⁸ Penney and Livingston, "Lessons," 112.

⁴⁹ Jones et al, *Created*, 376.

bisexual, and transgender people is extremely high. The recent multiple suicides of gay American teens due to bullying is proof of that. And on a societal level, people of color are still seen as inferior in certain areas of the country. There are still some people today that view women in a more second-class role, and in places like the U.S. military, the sexes are not equal. We have made some major advancement in human rights since the Civil War, including granting the same legal rights to everyone, no matter your race or gender. Women and people of color now have all the same legal rights and legal privileges granted to men. But now we need to apply our views of equality and understanding to people of other races, nationalities, and sexual preferences. While it is true that today we have greater religious tolerance, many Americans are still intolerant of other religions. We need to learn from the abolitionists and the reformists of the mid 1800's, we need to not be afraid to fight for what is right, and we need to work for change and equality.