

**“Under an Ill Tongue”: Witchcraft and Religion in Seventeenth-Century  
Virginia**

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## ABSTRACT

This project analyzes the role of religion, both institutional and private, in Virginia’s dealings with witchcraft during the seventeenth century. The witch trials of New England and Europe during the 1600s have tended to overshadow those that simultaneously took place in Virginia, leaving historians to prematurely regard Virginia as an anomaly of rationality in an otherwise superstitious period of witches and demons. Virginia’s failure to prosecute those accused of witchcraft was not due to a lack of allegations, my thesis will argue, but can instead be partly attributed to the nature of the colony’s religious experience and the theology and practices of Virginia’s Anglican Church. While Virginia’s seventeenth-century inhabitants migrated to the New World with firmly entrenched English religious values, their relationship with God and their response to the supernatural world were profoundly influenced by New World experiences and peoples. To protect the social fragility of their colony, Virginia’s political and religious leaders consciously chose to prosecute offenses that they felt threatened the social cohesion of the colony, such as fornication, gossip, and slander, and dismissed those, such as witchcraft, that threatened to tear it apart.

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## *Introduction*

In *The World Turned Upside Down*, Christopher Hill remarks: “Most men and women in seventeenth-century Britain lived in a world of magic, in which God and the devil intervened daily, a world of witches, fairies, and charms.”<sup>1</sup> English citizens living in Virginia during the seventeenth century were no different in this respect. The men and women who immigrated to the New World throughout the 1600s were products of the same theological culture as their English counterparts, and carried with them the modern European belief in the powers of demonic forces over events in the temporal world and its inhabitants. While references to such beliefs certainly exist in colonial court records and personal documents, relatively little attention has been given to this aspect of the settlers’ religious lives. The outright hysteria that plagued England and New England during the seventeenth century has frequently overshadowed the witchcraft trials that took place within Virginia’s borders during the same period.

Though Virginia was by no means thought of as a religious Zion by its early colonists, the 120 settlers who arrived at Jamestown in May 1607 believed with as much veracity as the Puritans did upon their arrival some thirteen years later, that God played a direct role in their deliverance. Religion was an important aspect of the Virginia colonists’ everyday lives, evident not only in their commitment to Christian religious practices, but also in their belief in the powers of both God and demonic forces. While Virginia’s history does not include a dark period of witchcraft hysteria similar to that of New England, allegations of witchcraft persisted in the colony throughout the 1600s and into the next century, constituting a unique and important facet of early Virginia’s religious culture. Though witchcraft accusations within Virginia were not as excessive in number as they were to the North—cases in seventeenth-century Virginia involving

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1972), 87.

allegations of witchcraft numbered only nineteen—they testify to a strong belief in the supernatural on the part of the colony's seventeenth-century inhabitants, regardless of gender or class distinctions.

The lives of Virginia's colonists during the seventeenth century were filled with the same unease concerning the powers of the devil and those who chose to worship him as their New England and European counterparts, but with a decidedly different outcome. This project seeks to determine the social, religious, and political forces in Virginia that accounted for the contrasting conclusion of Virginia's courts in regard to witchcraft allegations, in order to demonstrate the continued importance of religion in the lives of Virginia's colonists throughout the seventeenth century. How did the colonial experience of England's seventeenth-century settlers affect their reaction to suspected practitioners of witchcraft and their understanding of the supernatural? Furthermore, what bearing did the Anglican Church and its religious doctrine have on the Virginia court proceedings regarding accusations of witchcraft?

This project addresses these questions by examining the interrelation between the colonists' religious and supernatural beliefs in seventeenth-century Virginia. Belief in the supernatural did not exist autonomously from Christian religious practices; indeed, the natural and the supernatural were intimately linked in the minds of seventeenth-century peoples. While today it is hard to imagine a time when persons could be prosecuted for taking on the form of a cat or using demonic powers to cause sickness in another, in colonial America belief in the supernatural was very real. The threats of witchcraft were discussed in the Bible, and educated men, including the King of England, wrote on the activities and supposed traits of witches. A belief in witchcraft and the supernatural powers of its adherents was prevalent in European society during the seventeenth century and was an idea that the colonists certainly would have carried with them to

America. The colonists believed that those who chose to do Satan's work were capable of almost anything, from causing crop failure to murder, once his demonic powers were granted to them.

I am less concerned with the actual practices of witchcraft and magic in seventeenth-century Virginia than with what colonials perceived these practices (and their possibilities) to be. The seventeenth-century belief in the power of witchcraft reveals much about the theology of colonial Virginians and how they interpreted unexplainable events in the temporal world. In a discussion of European witchcraft, historians Alan Kors and Edward Peters argue that “[i]f mental health may be said to consist of people's confident reliance on the knowledge and experience of the real world which they are certain they possess, the utilization of mental and moral energy to eliminate the causes of trauma and dread, and the attempt to control those forces that most effect our lives, then the witchcraft persecutions...represented, not an insane ‘aberration,’ but a desperate attempt to apply a system of putative knowledge toward restoring order in the world.”<sup>2</sup> One sees multiple times in the historical record witchcraft allegations arising in Virginia following unexplainable events such as familial sickness, the death of livestock, and crop failure. Like their European counterparts seventeenth-century Virginians turned to religion to account for the unexplainable in their daily lives. It is important to note that in the Virginia records one does see a hesitation to convict an accused person of witchcraft without proper evidence, but not an outright denial of the existence of witches or their powers to do harm in the temporal world. Christians of all classes in Virginia continued to accept the power of witches as a plausible phenomenon, even as they refused to prosecute accusations without suitable evidence.

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<sup>2</sup> Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 12.

Throughout the twentieth century, scholars of early American history have characterized Virginia's earliest colonists as money-hungry profiteers, interested in little else than the fame and fortune they were sure to discover upon reaching the New World. In the 1914 introduction to his account of Grace Sherwood's 1705 trial for witchcraft, historian George Lincoln Burr comments: "To those who know what elements made up the earliest population of Virginia it is needless to point out why there we find no such abiding fear of the devil and his minions as among the religious exiles of New England," an interpretation clearly at odds with contemporary historical scholarship.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Edmund S. Morgan chose in his enormously influential *American Slavery, American Freedom* to bypass the topic of religion in Virginia altogether, emphasizing instead the economic motivations of the colonists who migrated to North America with "high expectations" of finding riches and success.<sup>4</sup>

Religious historian Perry Miller notes that scholars such as Burr and Morgan are "confident that from the beginning only material ambitions of empire, profit, tobacco, and real estate occupied their [Virginia] pioneers. Historians who think exclusively in terms of economic incentives are relieved when they turn from New England, with its annoying proclivities for theology and polity, to a Virginia where no such nonsense supervenes."<sup>5</sup> Perry contends that such a view does not allow for the deeper motivations of the colony's promoters and settlers: "[T]he desire of achieving a holy city was less explicit in the dreams of the Virginia Company than in those of Winthrop; still, the colonizing impulse was fulfilled within the same frame of universal relevance as the Puritans assumed."<sup>6</sup> Though Virginia was by no means founded as a "Promised

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<sup>3</sup> George Lincoln Burr, "Introduction," in *Narrative of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, ed. George Lincoln Burr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 435.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 88.

<sup>5</sup> Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964): 99.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*



Land” for its inhabitants, seventeenth-century colonists shared with their European counterparts an almost unwavering belief in God’s providence over their lives, a faith they continued to call upon during the periods of uncertainty and difficulty that characterized the colonial experience.

Contemporary historians who have begun to rethink the accepted classification of the Jamestown experiment in terms of failure have also begun to question the past emphasis placed on wealth and empire as the sole motivations for the English colonization of the New World. Colonial historians, such as James Horn, Karen Kupperman, and Edward Bond, today recognize the great importance placed on divine providence by Virginia’s inhabitants, providing a more well-rounded view of Virginia society beginning with the seventeenth century and beyond. Historian Edward Bond remarks that “[a]lthough colonial leaders during the colony’s earliest years often complained about the large numbers of lower-class rabble whose idleness and other sins were a constant threat to the polity’s survival, there were also in Virginia men of prayer who knew that as human beings they were more than missionaries of empire.”<sup>7</sup> Virginia colonists from diverse social and economic backgrounds quoted Scripture in letters, prayed to God for protection, and searched the natural world for signs of His intervention.<sup>8</sup>

New interpretations of Virginia’s past identify seventeenth-century colonists not only as ambitious men motivated by dreams of wealth but also as religious men, an important historical fact often overlooked in light of New England’s overtly devout settlers. In *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake*, James Horn notes that “[t]he profound importance of religion in the Bible Commonwealth has been compared to irreligion and secularism in the tobacco colonies... Whereas the northern colonies approximated Old World

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<sup>7</sup> Edward Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony: Religion in Seventeenth-Century Virginia* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000), 93.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

society in the New, the Chesapeake was a grotesque parody.”<sup>9</sup> While the Virginia colonists were no doubt motivated by the New World’s promises of wealth and freedom, it is naïve to assume they abandoned their Old World religious convictions upon their arrival. Recognizing and critically evaluating the importance of religion in the daily lives of Virginia’s colonists promises to reveal a more enlightening picture of seventeenth-century colonial society, colonial people, and colonial institutions.

While the number of scholarly works produced on the subject of witchcraft in England and New England continues to grow, witchcraft in Virginia has not received specific scholarly attention in decades. For example, Horn devotes only six pages of his 461-page study to the discussion of Chesapeake witchcraft, and religious historian Jon Butler allocates to the subject no more than a passing mention in a footnote in his monumental work *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*. While the number of witchcraft cases in Virginia does not rival that of its neighbors to the North, the trials in Virginia testify to a strong belief in the supernatural on the part of the colony’s inhabitants and the continued importance of religion in the lives of the colonists throughout the century. As James Horn states, “A consideration of religion, including the occult, is important not only for its own sake, giving a more rounded picture of society, but also because it provides a glimpse into the minds of ordinary men and women: what they thought about their relationship with God, the afterlife, and the cosmos.”<sup>10</sup>

This project seeks to remedy the lack of specific attention given by scholars to the relationship between institutional religion and witchcraft in Virginia’s first century of European colonization. It aims to demonstrate through the prism of witchcraft trials in the colony the continued importance of religion in the lives of Virginia’s inhabitants throughout the seventeenth

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<sup>9</sup> James Horn, *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994), 8.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 418.

century and their belief in the power of supernatural beings to bring both harm and blessings to the people of the temporal world. In doing so, it will approach the topic in the form of three sections. The first section will address the supernatural world of Virginia's earliest colonists during the first decades of settlement by focusing specifically on English perceptions of God's role in their colonial venture and His nemesis' role in Indian cosmology. The second will provide an overview of Virginia's dealings with witchery within its colonial borders, and demonstrate how the colony's experience with witchcraft both conformed to and differed from the English model of belief and prosecution. The third and final section will address the role of religion, both institutional and private, in Virginia's court proceedings to determine the extent to which the religious culture of the colony affected its hesitation to prosecute paltry allegations of witchcraft.

The first settlers to arrive in the New World were products of the same theological culture as their English counterparts, and held firmly to their beliefs in Christianity and the supernatural to explain the unknown land and people with whom they interacted. The first chapter will provide a better understanding of how the formation of a religious culture in the colony's early years, particularly in regard to the supernatural, influenced the religious beliefs of the colonists and their responses to witchcraft allegations throughout the century. The colonists transported with them two important ideas that would profoundly shape the supernatural world of early Virginia: a firm belief in God's providential power and an accepted interconnection between American Indian religion and devil worship. Virtually all colonists shared a common belief in the providence of God and that all earthly occurrences happened according to His will. While seventeenth-century colonists viewed God as a protector and provider, they also believed that God would punish those on earth for their misdeeds or for their failure to obey Biblical law.

English attitudes also predisposed colonists to see evidence of malevolent supernatural forces in North America. The English asserted that the Indians distorted their physical appearance and dress to appear more similar to the devil, illustrating the common belief that the physical body reflected the state of one's soul. For seventeenth-century Europeans, "[i]f Satan indeed ruled North America, then the indigenous non-Christian inhabitants either out of choice or fear must have been his subjects."<sup>11</sup> In the early years of settlement in North America, English observations of Indian religious practices confirmed the existence of malevolent demonic forces, profoundly shaping the colonists' relationship with the divine in the process. They observed Indian rituals with both awe and suspicion, all the while relying on God for protection and guidance in the still unfamiliar world of seventeenth-century Virginia.

The second section of this project will address some of the dominant cases of witchcraft allegations within Virginia's borders in the seventeenth century, beginning with the charges brought against Goodwife Wright in 1626 and ending with the infamous trial of Grace Sherwood in 1705, in order to illustrate the colonists' continued belief in the powers of the occult throughout the seventeenth century. As discussed earlier, the colonists initially felt the power of the devil most at work in the Indian societies that surrounded them in Virginia. In the population boom among the settlers following the Indian uprising of 1622, however, charges of witchcraft ceased to be exclusively against Indians. In seventeenth-century Virginia "there were enough colonists to now represent all forms of sin."<sup>12</sup>

Witchcraft cases in Virginia generally fell into two categories: defamation suits and more serious trials of actual wrongdoing. While defamation suits occurred more frequently than actual

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<sup>11</sup> Edward Bond, "Source of Knowledge, Source of Power: The Supernatural World of English Virginia, 1607-1624," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 108, no. 2 (2000): 3.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Beale Davis, "The Devil in Virginia in the Seventeenth Century," in *Literature and Society in Early Virginia, 1608-1840* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 25.

trials of witchcraft in seventeenth-century Virginia, the more serious trials clearly incorporate elements of contemporary English beliefs about witchcraft and illustrate the continual colonial belief in the powers of the supernatural world. My thesis will in part seek to explain why the number of civil slander suits outweighed by far judicial trials for witchery and to determine how the religious culture of Virginia, in some part, contributed to the active decision of colonial justices to prosecute the crime of slander and not the crime of witchcraft.

In every instance in Virginia where the basis of the charge is known (which constitutes the strong majority of the colony's seventeenth-century cases), the allegation centered around acts of *maleficium*, defined by historian James Horn as the causing of "physical injury or death of persons or damage to their property, usually crops and livestock, by occult means."<sup>13</sup> The association of witchcraft with acts of *maleficium* had been established in Europe well before the seventeenth century. In the late Middle Ages, however, Europeans' understanding of the nature of witchcraft began to change. The notion that a witch owed her powers to having made a deliberate pact with the devil became a dominant characteristic of European witchcraft. From this view, the essence of witchcraft was not the harm committed against another person, but the heretical sin of devil worship. Witchcraft had now become a Christian heresy in Europe through its ideological association with a rejection of God and adherence to Satan. While it is difficult to determine the extent to which the theological alignment of witchcraft with a diabolical pact with Satan had influenced the ideas of the continent's laity, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century trials do indicate some sort of association in the contemporary mind between maleficent magic and the devil.<sup>14</sup> Plaintiffs and testifiers in Virginia never explicitly link the crime of witchcraft with any diabolical

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<sup>13</sup> Horn, *Adapting to a New World*, 413.

<sup>14</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Belief* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 438, 441-442.

influence, though more implicit examples of the influence of European ideas regarding witchcraft are evident in colonial court proceedings.

Virginia's response to witchcraft allegations was, therefore, traditionally English but also unique to the colonial experience. While Virginia's seventeenth-century inhabitants migrated to the New World with firmly entrenched English religious values, their relationship with God and their response to the supernatural world were profoundly influenced by New World experiences and peoples. Virginia's unique response to witchcraft allegations, my thesis will argue, was greatly influenced by the nature of the colony's religious experience and the theology and practices of Virginia's Anglican Church. While Virginians continued to adhere to the religious doctrine of the Church of England, the colony's religious institution was much different by the close of the seventeenth century from the church its inhabitants had left behind.

The final section of this project will analyze the role of Virginia's Anglican Church in the proceedings and determine the extent to which the influence of Virginia's official church accounted for the skeptical position of the colony's courts in response to unsupported accusations of supernatural misconduct. The reason the witchcraft persecutions so common in New England and Europe did not flourish in colonial Virginia was not due to a lack of accusations, but can instead be partly explained by the practical teachings and practices of Virginia's Anglican Church and its continuing evolution in response to the dynamics and challenges of colonial life.

While the colonists of New England and Virginia agreed on fundamental aspects of Christian theology, it was their differences in belief as well as purpose that resulted in the two regions reacting to the threat of witchcraft in such different ways. Puritan colonists were determined to establish in America a new English Israel, "new" in its exemplary godliness.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Richard Godbeer, *The Devil's Dominion: Magic and Religion in Early New England* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 5.

Magic, a practice which colonial leaders condemned as blasphemous and diabolical, had no place in their vision of a Utopian New England. “Tis horrible that in this land of Uprightness, there should be any such Pranks of Wickedness,” declared one New England preacher.<sup>16</sup> Such a perspective helps to explain that when the fervent accusations of witchcraft broke out in waves in New England, the prosecuting power of the church and that of the courts were inextricably linked.

Authorities in colonial Virginia were never as fanatical in their prosecution of accused witches as were their counterparts in Puritan New England. For example, whereas at least 344 people were put on trial for witchcraft in the New England colonies between the years of 1620 and 1725, Virginia tried only nineteen colonists on suspicion of superstitious behavior during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.<sup>17</sup> In further contrast with the witch trials of Puritan New England, the Anglican clergy of Virginia did little to instigate any prosecutions of suspected witches within the colony. The church’s clergy rarely took part in these cases—save in one trial—unlike their counterparts in New England, who interpreted any allegation of witchcraft as a serious threat to the morality of their Puritan community.

The religious doctrine of Virginia’s clergy encompassed a theology that encouraged a pious, private relationship with God, profoundly affected their reaction to witchcraft allegations. As evident in their reaction to the witchcraft trials, Anglican ministers in Virginia preached a practical faith, one compatible with day-to-day living in colonial society. A system of public morality and private faith emerged in Virginia, a pattern influenced by the short supply of ministers sent from England to fill the colony’s pulpits, a problem that coincidentally plagued Virginia for much of the seventeenth century. Maintaining a sense of community in Virginia’s unfamiliar and intimidating environment could be difficult, and in the years immediately

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1987), 47; Hudson, “*These Detestable Slaves*,” 30-55.

following the Indian uprising of 1622, the records suggest the importance of religion in preserving social community in the growing colony.<sup>18</sup> Virginia's courts chose to prosecute offenses they felt most threatened Virginia's fragile social fabric, crimes such as fornication, gossip, and the slander suits that often accompanied allegations of witchcraft. The Anglican emphasis on a private, personal relationship with God most certainly affected the Virginia colony's dealings with accusations of witchcraft. The trials that occurred in Virginia were mostly devoid of any ecclesiastical influence, allowing the courts to rule more so according to civil law and less in reaction to public outcries of religious fervor. Although Virginia's founders never intended for the colony to become a religious Zion for its inhabitants, the colony's first settlers emigrated with firmly entrenched English religious ideals in regard to the powers of the divine and diabolic, beliefs that affected their interaction with Virginia's unfamiliar terrain, native peoples, and with one another.

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<sup>18</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony*, 91, 125.



*Chapter One*  
*The Divine and the Diabolic in God's Chosen Empire: The Formation of Virginia's Religious Culture in the Early Seventeenth Century*

In *A True Relation*, Virginia leader George Percy relates the story of Hugh Pryse, who, suffering from “extreme famine” during the winter of 1609, ran through Jamestown’s marketplace crying out “There is no God!” Percy records Pryse as saying that if God existed, He would not allow His creation to suffer as the colonists did from starvation and disease during Jamestown’s harshest winter. Pryse later left the fort in search of food with a companion; ultimately, both men were slain by the surrounding Powhatan. Percy relates that God revealed His indignation when colonists discovered Pryse’s corpse mauled by wolves, yet found his companion’s body untouched less than six yards away. Pryse’s demise was for Percy a sign of God’s “just judgment” against those who broke God’s covenant with the English, illustrating the seventeenth-century acceptance of God’s power and providence in the temporal world.<sup>19</sup>

The colonists brought with them to North America two important ideas that would profoundly shape the supernatural world of early Virginia: a firm belief both in God’s providential power and the connection between American Indian religion and devil worship. The colonists shared a common belief in the providence of God and that all earthly occurrences happened according to His will. While seventeenth-century colonists viewed God as a protector and provider, they also believed that God would punish them for their failure to obey Biblical law. In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas notes that “religion was positively reinforced by the hardships of life,” a statement no doubt supported by the experiences of

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<sup>19</sup> George Percy, *A True Relation of the Proceedings and Occurrences of Moment Which Have Happened in Virginia [1609-1612]*, (London, 1612), Virtual Jamestown, <[http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts\\_date.html#1600](http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts_date.html#1600)>.

Virginians in the colony's early years.<sup>20</sup> During the colony's first decades, what historian Edward Bond refers to as a "theology of the natural world" emerged, that defined the link between sin and God's vengeance, a theology that encompassed both traditional English beliefs and a religious ideology unique to the settlers' colonial experience.<sup>21</sup> The colonists interpreted daily occurrences, from mundane misfortunes to death and disease, as literal signs of God's divine blessing or judgment.

This chapter will demonstrate that the early colonists' understanding of God's providence and their misinterpretation of the Indians' "diabolic religion" profoundly affected the formation of Virginia's religious culture in the early seventeenth century. Both facets of Virginia's supernatural world demonstrate the seventeenth-century belief in the omnipotent powers of both God and Satan, which the early colonists were constantly reminded of through their daily interactions on the North American continent. I will also argue that the theology of Virginia's supernatural world in the early seventeenth century led to the formation of a religious system in the colony based more on social morality than theology. The early colonists' experience with Virginia's environment and interaction with native peoples and with one another resulted in a religious culture that emphasized appropriate behavior over belief to protect the fragile social fabric of Virginia in its early decades. The nature of Virginia's unique religious system would greatly influence the colony's interaction with the supernatural world throughout the colonial period.

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<sup>20</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Belief* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 82.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony: Religion in Seventeenth-Century Virginia* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000), 53.

While the association of Pryse's death with divine retribution may appear questionable today, the vast majority of people in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries would have found the sequence of events described by Percy completely logical. Men and women never doubted the reality of God or His intervention in the daily occurrences of the temporal world.<sup>22</sup> Even if some may have questioned the validity of certain aspects of Christian theology, "belief in God seems to have remained all but universal."<sup>23</sup> The colonists' firm belief in God's providential design was no doubt the product of the Reformation's theological culture in Europe. Historian Keith Thomas writes that "[d]ivine omnipotence was still believed to be reflected in daily happenings, and the world provided abundant testimony to the continuous manifestation of God's purpose."<sup>24</sup> Post-Reformation theologians taught that nothing could happen in this world without God's permission. If their writings reflected any commonality, it was their denial of the possibility of chance or accident. According to the reflections of the Elizabethan bishop Thomas Cooper, "[t]hat which we call fortune is nothing but the hand of God, working by causes and for causes that we know not. Chance or fortune are gods devised by man and made by our ignorance of the true almighty, and everlasting God."<sup>25</sup>

While a Deist view of God's earthly intervention had begun to develop during the seventeenth century, most Europeans still accepted the world as God's intentional creation and would have found the idea of a deity who abandoned his creation to its own devices reprehensible. The beliefs of Virginia's earliest inhabitants were, therefore, products of early modern Europe's theological culture, a religious system that accepted God's purposeful role in

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>23</sup> James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), 1-2.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 78.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Cooper, *Certain Sermons Wherein Is Contained the Defense of the Gospell Now Preached* (London: Ralphe Newbery, 1580), 164; Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 79.

temporal events with little reservation. Faced with starvation, disease, and Indian hostility, the colonists found comfort and purpose in a faith that provided answers for life's adversities as well as its pleasures.

As England's established church, the Church of England accompanied the settlers to Virginia, and when they successfully planted a colony at Jamestown in 1607, the church was a necessary part of that venture. Given the importance of national churches in the process of European colonization during the sixteenth century, it comes as no surprise that the crown believed the transfer of the Church of England to America was essential for the maintenance of order. Church and state were inseparable in England and would be in seventeenth-century Virginia as well.<sup>26</sup> The royal charters establishing the Church of England in Virginia obligated the colonists "to propagate and support the polity, doctrine, and traditions of the national church."<sup>27</sup> Soon after their arrival, the settlers constructed a makeshift church building by hanging a sail from several trees to shield the minister and congregation from sun and rain, and by nailing a block of wood between two trees to serve as a pulpit. Later describing this early worship space of the colonists in 1631, John Smith wrote, "this was our Church...we had daily Common Prayer morning and evening, every Sunday two Sermons, and every three months the Holy Communion."<sup>28</sup> Smith's focus was not on the grand historical drama of colonization taking place, but on a humble spot where he and fellow settlers gathered to worship God in a crude and improvised structure.

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<sup>26</sup> James Horn, *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994), 383.

<sup>27</sup> James Bell, *The Imperial Origins of the King's Church in Early America, 1607-1783* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 5.

<sup>28</sup> John Smith, *Advertisements for the Unexperienced Planters of New-England*, in *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith*, vol. III, ed. Phillip L. Barbour (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1986), 295.

The Virginia Company of London took its obligations to provide for the religious needs of the colonists seriously, although its members held more modest goals than transferring English's ecclesiastical polity to North America. As a trading company, the Virginia Company held little authority over the institutional church. In addition, the people who migrated to Virginia formed a transient and unstable population, due mostly to deaths caused by disease in the early years, that likely could not have sustain the church's institutional structure. This is, of course, not to say that company leaders did not hold religion in high regard. However, the Virginia Company's concern was more pastoral than bureaucratic: "The ministers it sent to Virginia served to help men and women, English and foreign, cultivate their relationships with the divine: they ministered to the colonists' spiritual needs and attempted to establish a mission to Virginia's native population."<sup>29</sup>

Early governors of the colony were required by James I to ensure that "the true word and service of God and Christian faith be preached, planted, and used...according to the doctrine, rights, and religion now professed and established within our realm of England."<sup>30</sup> Services were to be held every Sunday, and attendance was mandatory. Sir Thomas Dale's *Lawes Divine, Morall, and Martial* of 1612 laid down stringent punishments for absence from church, blasphemy, and disobedience: loss of food rations, whipping, a stint in the galleys, and ultimately, for persistent offenders, death.<sup>31</sup> This severe code of laws redefined Virginia's relationship with God and, consequently, the role of religion in the polity, by emphasizing the importance of behavior over belief as a determinant of Christian identity. Behavior distinguished the colonists from surrounding indigenous groups and the colonial government regulated settlers' actions accordingly. If Virginian's civil and religious leaders, of whom there were few until the end of the

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<sup>29</sup> Edward Bond and John Gundersen, *The Episcopal Church in Virginia, 1607-2007* (Richmond, VA: Virginia Historical Society, 2007), 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> Horn, *Adapting to a New World*, 383.

<sup>31</sup> See *For the Colony in Virginea Britannia. Lawes Divine, Morall, and Martiall* [1612], Virtual Jamestown, <[http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts\\_date.html#1600](http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts_date.html#1600)>.

seventeenth century, could not produce a legitimate Christian faith in their colonists, they attempted to maintain the social context in which a sincere faith may flourish by upholding the standards of English civility.<sup>32</sup> The *Lawes* created a religious culture that accounted for human nature, constructing for Virginians a religious identity suitable to life in North America.<sup>33</sup> In Virginia, an alliance existed between church and state in order to enforce social and moral disciplines, a precedent that continued to define the relationship between Virginia's church and state throughout the colonial period.

#### *Divine Providence in England's Colonial Venture*

Though the colony's leaders ultimately failed in their efforts to create a strong and unified church, Virginians undoubtedly experienced and recorded signs of God's presence in their daily lives. Virginia's early literature is filled with references to God's providential design in delivering individuals-- and the English empire as a whole--to the New World. After reviewing his career as a soldier and adventurer, John Smith asserted that he had lived through thirty-seven years of wars, pestilence, and famine, and now had nothing but pains for his reward, yet he continued to thank God "whose omnipotent power only delivered me, to do the utmost of my best to make his name known in those remote parts of the world, and his loving mercy to serve a sinner."<sup>34</sup> The Reverend Alexander Whitaker noted in *Good Newes from Virginia* that the ministers who chose to serve in a modest church in the New World rather than a comfortable rectory in England did so because "the God of heaven found us out, and made us ready to our hands, able and fit men, for the ministerial function in this Plantation."<sup>35</sup> In a similar vein English minister William Crashaw

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<sup>32</sup> Edward Bond, "Religion in Seventeenth-Century Anglican Virginia: Myth, Persuasion, and the Creation of an American Identity" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1995), 170.

<sup>33</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls*, 67.

<sup>34</sup> Smith, *The Complete Works*, vol. III, 285.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Whitaker, *Good Newes from Virginia*, (London, 1613), Virtual Jamestown, <[http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts\\_date.html#1600](http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts_date.html#1600)>.

patriotically declared that “if ever the hand of God appeared in action of man, it was here most evident: for when man had forsaken this business, God took it in hand.”<sup>36</sup>

As statements such as Crashaw’s compellingly demonstrate, the English quite often interpreted the providence of God as divine support for their nation’s quest for empire. Indeed, the English saw themselves as the nation chosen by God to establish an exemplary Christian society in the New World. The English took this divine calling seriously, particularly in light of the large-scale proselytization efforts undertaken by the Spanish beginning in the early sixteenth century. While England played only a minor role in western voyage for much of the sixteenth century, the successes of the Spanish in acquiring both wealth and Catholic converts in the Americas intrigued and alarmed English advocates for colonization. This competition for souls would play as much a role in the writings of colonial propagandists as did the economic benefits of western colonies. Taking as his text Genesis 12, the English Reverend William Symonds compares the destiny of the English to that of Abraham and his descendents: “For the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred, and from thy fathers house, unto the land that I will show thee, and I will make thee a great nation.” The “Lord that called Abraham into another country doeth also...call you [the English] to go and carry the Gospel to a nation that never heard of Christ.”<sup>37</sup> This was the mission that awaited the English as the chosen nation of God.

It was Richard Hakluyt, however, the foremost proponent of colonization of his age, who provided the fullest explanation of England’s overseas ambitions and a rationale for colonization that would guide English policy overseas for years to come.<sup>38</sup> Hakluyt, a highly successful Oxford

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<sup>36</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> John Parker, “Religion and the Virginia Colony, 1609-10,” in *The Westward Enterprise: English Activities in Ireland, the Atlantic and America, 1480-1650*, ed. K.R. Andrews, N.P. Canny, and P.E.H. Hair (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 1978), 257; James Horn, *A Land As God Made It: Jamestown and the Birth of America* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 139.

<sup>38</sup> Horn, *A Land As God Made It*, 23-24.

scholar also ordained in the Anglican Church, was one of the earliest advocates of and investors in the Virginia settlement. Reflecting the theology of his time, Hakluyt's discourses on colonization are filled with references to God's divine providence in all things. As Hakluyt saw it, even the work of navigators and explorers were subject to the power of God and His judgment. In the quest for new discoveries, virtue would be blessed and sin punished.<sup>39</sup> "We forgot that Godliness is great riches, and that if we first seek the kingdom of God, all other things will be given to us, and that as the light accompanies the Sun, and the heat the fire, so lasting riches do wait upon them that are zealous for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ, and the enlargement of his glorious Gospel: as it is said, I will honor them that honor me."<sup>40</sup>

In his *Discourse Concerning Western Planting*, the first argument promulgated by Hakluyt in favor of the Virginia venture is "[t]hat this western discovery will be greatly for the enlargement of the gospel of Christ whereunto the Princes of the reformed religion are chiefly bound[,] amongst whom her Majesty is principal."<sup>41</sup> In this letter to the Queen, Hakluyt put the importance of conversion above that of either gold or glory, emphasizing the duty of Europe's Protestant leaders to spread the true faith to America's inhabitants. Hakluyt was convinced that planting English colonies in America would be a "most godly and Christian work" that ultimately would lead to "gaining...the souls of millions of those wretched people [Indians]," bringing "them from darkness to light."<sup>42</sup> Hakluyt was sincere in his advocacy of evangelization, but he was sufficiently realistic to understand that colonization would not materialize if it was based on evangelical arguments alone. The likelihood of profits for individuals and glory for the English

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<sup>39</sup> David Harris Sacks, "Discourses of Western Planting: Richard Hakluyt and the Making of the Atlantic World," in *The Atlantic World and Virginia, 1550-1624*, ed. Peter C. Mancall (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 418.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted. in *Ibid.*, 418.

<sup>41</sup> Richard Hakluyt, *Discourse Concerning Western Planting* [1584], ed. Charles Deane (Cambridge: Press of John Wilson and Son, 1877), 3.

<sup>42</sup> James Horn, *A Land As God Made It*, 24.



nation were more important factors in encouraging colonial investment. Hakluyt's writings also emphasize Virginia's importance in advancing the English economy through trade with the Indians and as a strategic base against the Spanish in North America. This was not inconsistent with Hakluyt's larger goal of evangelization: the establishment of colonial posts and a growing market were seen as the means God had provided for achieving it.<sup>43</sup> Hakluyt's discourses on colonization can be seen, therefore, not simply as anti-Spanish diatribes or propaganda, but primarily as having centrally religious messages. They demonstrate a definitive belief in God's providence and in His divine approval for the establishment of English colonies in the New World.

The survival of Virginia through the devastating "Starving Time" and its continual growth during its first decade of existence were, in the eyes of the English, clear signs of God's approval and support for their colonial venture. Perhaps the most famous example of providence in action was the arrival in 1610 of Lord De la Warr in Virginia, just in time to save the colony from abandonment. Following failed attempts to feed themselves and extort food from surrounding indigenous groups during the harsh winter of 1609/10, the men of Jamestown decided to abandon the settlement. Some argued for burning the settlement to the ground, to demonstrate their anger. On reaching the Chesapeake Bay while making their way toward the Atlantic, the settlers received word that Lord De la Warr, the colony's new governor, had arrived in the bay with men and supplies. Had the remaining colonists not been able to endure the hardships another day or the oceanic winds with which De la Warr sailed been less favorable, England's colonial experiment in Virginia would have ended in failure, as Roanoke had some twenty years earlier.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Sacks, "Discourses on Western Planting," 443.

<sup>44</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Company*, 32.

Lord De la Warr's arrival in 1610 was interpreted as more than coincidence by Virginia's colonists. Now back in England, Smith surmised that God would not allow the colony to be uprooted, that it "was the arm of the Lord of Hosts, who would have his people pass the red Sea and Wilderness, and then to possess the land of Canaan."<sup>45</sup> De la Warr's rescue mission was interpreted by the English as divine support for England's imperial actions and a clear indication of God's willingness to see England become a key leader in Europe's race for colonial expansion. Virginia's early colonists believed that providences such as Hugh Pryse's violent death in the winter of 1609, the Indian Uprising of 1622, and De la Warr's rescue mission were some of the most significant means by which God communicated with His followers. As "sources of knowledge" in the colonial world, these occurrences marked the existence of a deeper significance of temporal events and offered people a way of looking at the world that furnished history with purpose.<sup>46</sup> George Sandys, Virginia colonists and councilmen, for example, reflected in 1623 that all the calamities the colony had endured in its short history--famines, sickness, and Indian attacks--were signs from God that the colonists ought to stop settling in such dispersed locations, a pattern Sandys thought detrimental to the wellbeing of the young colony. Such settlements made the colonists very vulnerable to Indian attack and angered God by allowing disorderly settlers to "live like Libertines out of the eye of the Magistrate."<sup>47</sup>

In February 1609/10, Crashaw had taken to his pulpit in London at the behest of fellow members of the Virginia Company to preach a sermon before De la Warr set sail for the colony. No doubt intending to deliver an inspirational message, Crashaw time and again in his sermon

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<sup>45</sup> Smith, *The Generall History of Virginia, New-England, and the Sumer Isles* (London, 1624), in *The Complete Works*, vol. II, 233-35; Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony*, 33.

<sup>46</sup> Edward Bond, "Source of Knowledge, Source of Power: The Supernatural World of English Virginia, 1607-1624," *Virginia Magazine of History & Biography* 108, no. 2 (2000): 2.

<sup>47</sup> George Sandys to Sir Miles Sandys, March 30, 1623, in *Records of the Virginia Company of London*, ed. Susan Myra Kingsbury, vol. IV (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1906-35), 70; Bond, "Source of Knowledge," 2.

linked the English attempt at empire with God's providential design for the North American continent, theorizing that "God himself had built a bridge for men to pass from England to Virginia."<sup>48</sup> Crashaw described to members of the Virginia Company, who composed the majority of his audience, a special relationship between England and God, linking the deity's divine preference with England's national identity.<sup>49</sup>

Patriotically, Crashaw later stated, "He that was the God of Israel is still the God of England," drawing a direct comparison between Israel and God's new chosen people.<sup>50</sup> Crashaw's association of England with God's promise to the Israelites occurred frequently in literature relating to the Virginia venture, the wandering of the Israelites serving as a classic example of God's treatment of His chosen people. Historian Edward Bond remarks that "although colonial leaders during the colony's earliest years often complained about the large numbers of lower-class rabble whose idleness and other sins were a constant threat to the polity's survival, there were also in Virginia men of prayer who knew that as human beings they were more than missionaries of empire."<sup>51</sup> Virginia writers time and again referred to the episode of the twelve scouts sent to inspect Canaan, ten of whom reported the land unworthy of settlement; only two scouts, Caleb and Joshua, spoke the truth. For the ten's dishonesty, God punished the people, but for Caleb and Joshua's truthfulness, He rewarded them. Like Caleb and Joshua, said influential Virginia colonist John Rolfe, those who have not allowed themselves to become disheartened by the mysterious workings of God's providence "have mightily upheld this Christian cause—for

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<sup>48</sup> William Crashaw, *A Sermon Preached in London before the Right Honorable the Lord Laware, Lord Governour and Captaine Generall of Virginea* (London, 1610), E-1.

<sup>49</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony*, 1-3.

<sup>50</sup> Crashaw, *A Sermon Preached in London*, L-1.

<sup>51</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony*, 93.

God, even our own God, did help them.”<sup>52</sup> This familiarity on the part of Rolfe with Biblical teaching also extended to others, regardless of social class. For example, Richard Frethorne, an indentured servant at Martin’s Hundred, posited a comparison between the English colonists and the Biblical army of Gilead in light of their enemies, stating in 1623 that though “they [the Powhatan] may easily take us....God is merciful and can save with few as well as many, as he showed to Gilead. And like Gilead’s soldiers, if they lapped water, we drink water which is but weak.”<sup>53</sup>

In addition to the comparison of England with Israel repeated in early writings from the colony, settlers pointed to similarities between the North American wilderness and the Old Testament’s original paradise. George Percy marveled at “woods full of Cedar and Cypress trees, which issue out sweet Gums like to Balsam. We kept on our way in this Paradise.”<sup>54</sup> John Smith described the continent as “all overgrown with trees and weeds[,] being a plain wilderness as God first made it.”<sup>55</sup> The discourse of colonization had conditioned settlers to look upon Virginia as Canaan, but their experience in North America transcended even their expectations of the Promised Land. Virginia was simultaneously Canaan and Eden for the Virginia settlers.<sup>56</sup>

The English viewed North America as an opportunity for a fresh start, a new Eden free from the over-crowdedness, filth, and war that seemed to characterize European society at the onset of the seventeenth century. The early settlers’ paradisiacal references to Virginia can,

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<sup>52</sup> Quoted in Perry Miller, “Religion and Society in the Early Literature of Virginia,” in *Errand Into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1964), 113.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Frethorne, Letter to His Father and Mother [1623], Virtual Jamestown, <<http://www.virtualjamestown.org/frethorne.html>>.

<sup>54</sup> Percy, *Observations Gathered Out of a Discourse of the Plantation of the Southerne Colonie in Virginia by the English* [1606], (London: Samuel Purchas, 1625), Virtual Jamestown, <[http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts\\_date.html#1600](http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts_date.html#1600)>.

<sup>55</sup> Smith, *The Complete Works*, vol. I, 145. For further discussion of the co-joining of mission and empire in the Virginia venture, see James Horn’s *A Land as God Made It: Jamestown and the Birth of America* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), particularly chapters 1 and 5.

<sup>56</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Company*, 40.

therefore, be seen as more than mere descriptions of the landscape they were viewing; they served as reflections of a model English society that was to come. One English minister referred to Virginia as “a New Britain in another world,” while another confidently hypothesized that God would provide for the colonists and “show [them] to possess in peace and plenty, a Land more like the Garden of Eden: which the Lord planted, than any part else of all the earth.”<sup>57</sup> This redemptive aspect of England’s colonial venture is also evident in Hakluyt’s discourses on New World colonization. The underlying theme of his publications is not just the redemption of individual souls, but the restoration of the world to its original wholeness. Hakluyt envisioned the Virginia project as an opportunity to advance God’s “glory” through the “salvation of countless souls, and the increase of the Kingdom of Christ.”<sup>58</sup> By bringing religion, reason, and civility to North America, the English colony would thereby counter the descent back into barbarity currently taking place in Europe and carry forward God’s plan for the ultimate salvation of the world.<sup>59</sup> God had chosen the English people to establish an exemplary Christian society in the New World as representatives of the one true faith, a call for mobilization the English did not take lightly.

While such references to Virginia as a new paradise or Promised Land all but vanished within the first years of settlement, the colonists’ adherence to religion did not. As the land became more threatening and less paradisiacal, the colonists’ relationship with God and their credence in supernatural forces, both good and evil, continued to serve as their foundation for understanding the unfamiliar environment in which they resided.

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<sup>57</sup> Horn, *A Land As God Made It*, 139, 141.

<sup>58</sup> Sacks, “Discourses on Western Planting,” 436.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 443.

*Diabolism in the New World: English Perceptions of Indian Religious Practices*

The beauty of North America's land, water, and wildlife made it easy for the Virginia Company's propagandists to compare the continent to Eden, or to describe it as the English version of the Promised Land. Before North America was Canaan, however, Europeans regarded it as one of the darkest places on earth.<sup>60</sup>\* Contemporary attitudes, therefore, also predisposed the Virginia colonists to see evidence of malevolent supernatural forces in North America.

Accompanying the early modern belief in the powers of God was the correlating recognition of the existence of a personal and immanent devil. Satan was an everyday fixture in seventeenth-century religious life, and the continuous battle with the Prince of Darkness and his hierarchy of demons was a literal reality for most devout English.<sup>61</sup> Calvinist theologian James Calhfill asserted that such demons "appear to men in divers shapes, disquiet them when they are awake; trouble them in their sleeps, distort their members; take away their health; afflict them with diseases."<sup>62</sup> Visions of the devil's physical appearance only succeeded in buttressing seventeenth-century fears of Satan and his powers in the temporal world. Such apparitions sprang from childhood stories of Satan's bodily manifestation such as the one described by Reginald Scot: "[a]n ugly devil having horns on his head, fire in his mouth, and a tail in his breech, eyes like a basin, fangs like a dog, claws like a bear, a skin like a Niger and a voice roaring like a lion."<sup>63</sup>

The power of Satan as both a tempter and an adversary was a constant reality for the seventeenth-century English, a reality confirmed and reinforced by contemporary Christian theology. The existence of diabolical forces was so essential to Christian theology that it was

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<sup>60</sup> Bond, "Source of Knowledge," 3.

\*Sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europeans evidently did not recognize the contradiction in simultaneously viewing America as Eden and a demonic stronghold, nor have recent historians commented on the inconsistency.

<sup>61</sup> Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 472.

<sup>62</sup> James Calhfill, *An Answer to John Martiall's Treatise of the Cross* (Cambridge: University Press, 1846; Reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 318.

<sup>63</sup> Reginald Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584; Reprint, London: Printed for Andrew Clark, 1665), 85.

“paradoxically elevated into one of the greatest arguments for the existence of God, so that to deny it was to lay oneself open to the charge of atheism.”<sup>64</sup> To deny the existence of the devil was in fact to deny the existence of God; the two contrasting forces, therefore, buttressed the existence of each another. “If there be a God, as we most steadfastly must believe,” wrote sixteenth-century Protestant reformer Roger Hutchinson, “verily there is a Devil also; and if there be a Devil, there is no surer argument, no stronger proof, no plainer evidence, that there is a God.”<sup>65</sup> Seventeenth-century Englishmen associated the devil with any act of religious sacrilege, and in North America the existence of diabolical forces was for Virginia’s earliest colonists most evident in American Indian religious practices.

English literature on demonology taught that Satan reigned supreme in the world’s most remote and uncultivated territories. Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europeans believed that all pagans were direct worshippers of Satan and thought the devil to be particularly at home in heathen lands. The early Spanish historians of America promulgated the idea of the New World’s inhabitants as devil worshippers, a notion the English accepted without hesitation.<sup>66</sup> In 1597, King James I of England himself wrote in *Daemonologie* that the devil was present “where [he] finds greatest ignorance and barbarities,” and that witchcraft was most common in the “wild parts of the world.”<sup>67</sup> Early colonists did not dispute the common assumption that Virginia qualified as one of the world’s “wild parts.” For example, a daily prayer appended to the colony’s *Lawes Divine, Morall, and Martiall* acknowledges the surrounding lands as the place “where satans throne is,” a prayer that would have no doubt reminded the colonists daily that they inhabited a

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<sup>64</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 476.

<sup>65</sup> Roger Hutchinson, *The Works of Roger Hutchinson*, ed. John Bruce (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1842; New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 140-141.

<sup>66</sup> Richard Beale Davis, “The Devil in Virginia in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Literature and Society in Early Virginia, 1608-1840* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 17.

<sup>67</sup> James I, *Daemonologie* (Edinburgh, 1603), 68.

dangerous part of the world where diabolic forces reigned supreme.<sup>68</sup> Satan tempted moral men to sin against God and could also, seventeenth-century Englishmen believed, play a “prominent part in the execution of divine judgments.”<sup>69</sup> For example, the Indian Uprising of 1622 was interpreted by colonists as both a sign of God’s wrath and Satan’s influence. In his personal account of the Indian attack, one colonist noted that “the devil had through the medium of the priests such an influence upon the natives that they only waited for a good opportunity to extirpate the foreigners,” clearly implicating the devil in the bloody events of March 22.<sup>70</sup>

If Satan ruled over North America, then it followed that his reign extended over the inhabitants of the land as well. The English surmised that out of either fear or choice the Indians paid reverence to the devil through their religious practices and rituals.<sup>71</sup> The colonists were well aware that men did not have to worship God; an individual could choose to follow the devil instead, an abomination of which varying Christian sects routinely accused their opponents. Edward Bond explains that “Protestants claimed it of Roman Catholics; Roman Catholics claimed it of Protestants; and Christians of all persuasions believed devil worship played a central role in Native American culture.”<sup>72</sup> Such references occur repeatedly in early colonial accounts. On his

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<sup>68</sup> *Lawes Divine, Morall, and Martiall* [1612], <[http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts\\_date.html#1600](http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts_date.html#1600)>; Bond, “Source of Knowledge,” 3.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 472.

<sup>70</sup> “Voyage of Anthony Chester to Virginia” [1622], (Leyden, 1707), Virtual Jamestown, <[http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts\\_date.html#1600](http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts_date.html#1600)>.

<sup>71</sup> The English called the Powhatan devil worshippers, but only in a very limited sense were they correct. Englishmen took Virginian religion as a perverted version of their own theology, but the Powhatan did not recognize the existence of one supreme deity or the devil, in the Christian sense of the term. It is more accurate to describe the Powhatan as appeasers of a severe deity, “Okee,” who policed their actions. They paid great respect also to all things that could harm them, whether fire, water, lightning, or thunder. In everyday affairs, Okee was the most important deity in the Powhatan pantheon, responsible for judgment and punishment. The vengeful god punished the people with sickness, destroyed their crops, and stirred up wars. As the “malicious enemy of mankind,” Okee was the origin of all harm and fortune, and conformed most closely to the colonists’ conception of the devil. See James Horn, *A Land As God Made It: Jamestown and the Birth of America* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 16-22, Helen Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia: Their Traditional Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), Chapter 8, and Margaret Holmes Williamson, *Powhatan Lords of Life and Death: Command and Consent in Seventeenth-Century Virginia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), Chapter 4.

<sup>72</sup> Bond, “Source of Knowledge,” 3.



way to Jamestown in 1607, George Percy remarked that the people whom he encountered in the West Indies “are called by the names of Cannibals, that will eat man’s flesh...they worship the Devil for their God, and have no other belief.”<sup>73</sup> In dedicating the Reverend Alexander Whitaker’s *Good Newes from Virginia*, Master William Crashaw informed his reader that “Satan visibly and palpably reigns there more than in any other known place of the world.”<sup>74</sup> Virginia was thus accepted by early seventeenth-century Englishmen as the devil’s chosen dwelling place, a land that would witness continual encounters between the supreme forces of good and evil. Virginia’s early colonists inhabited a dangerous and unknown land most Englishmen could only read about, an experience that surely affected and ultimately transformed their relationship with the divine.

That the Virginia Indians were really agents of the devil—in their chiefs, their priests, their idols, and their ceremonies—was asserted repeatedly in Virginia’s seventeenth-century literature. Even their appearance reminded the apprehensive colonists of the “dark deity.”<sup>75</sup> Upon the English’s first landing at Kecoughtan, George Percy observed that the Indians danced like “so many Wolves and Devils.”<sup>76</sup> In his writing, John Smith alluded to the Indians repeatedly as devils, thinking both of their physical appearance and their diabolical actions. When he was captured, “they entertained him with the most strange and fearful conjurations; as if near led to hell, amongst the Devils to dwell.” He later referred to them as fiends “with red eyes, and white strokes over their black faces.”<sup>77</sup> Smith further described Powhatan as being “more like a devil than a man with some two hundred more as black as himself.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>73</sup> Percy, *Observations*.

<sup>74</sup> Alexander Whitaker, *Good Newes*.

<sup>75</sup> Davis, “The Devil in Virginia,” 18.

<sup>76</sup> Percy, *Observations*.

<sup>77</sup> Smith, *The Complete Works*, Vol. II, 149.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

The close relationship Europeans established between morality and Christianity and their preoccupation with Satan made them particularly interested in Indian religion. The Indians' chief god, Okee, is usually described by colonial writers as an inanimate representation of the devil.

Reflecting on the Indian religion John Smith states:

[T]heir chief God they worship is the Devil. Him they call Okee and serve him more of fear than love. They say they have conference with him, and fashion themselves near to his shape as they can imagine. In their Temples they have his image evil favouredly carved, and then painted and adorned with chains of copper, and beads, and covered with a skin, in such manner as the deformity may well suit with such a God.<sup>79</sup>

Smith saw a good deal more of the New World than most of his contemporaries, which only confirmed in his mind the common assumption of the time: Indians were pagans and pagans held a special place in the realm of Satan.<sup>80</sup>

By physically demonstrating a connection between body and spirit, Native American appearances confirmed English suspicions that the Indians were intimately linked with Satan. It is worth noting that Indian bodies were continually praised by the English without exception. Englishmen familiar with manuals of gentility would have seen their ideals of physical flawlessness reflected in colonial descriptions of the natives' physique.<sup>81</sup> Yet the English also believed that the Indians purposely distorted their physical appearance and dress in order to appear as similar as possible to their own deity, the devil. Native women had tattoos with images of serpents and wild beasts, while native men wore on their heads a variety of decorations ranging from the stuffed skins of hawks to rattles taken from rattlesnakes. Others wore as clothing severed hands from defeated human enemies. Such descriptions demonstrated the contemporary philosophy and theology that linked body and spirit by suggesting that the physical body reflected

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>80</sup> Bernard W. Sheehan, *Savagism and Civility: Indians and Englishmen in Colonial Virginia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 43.

<sup>81</sup> Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Indians and English: Facing Off in Early America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), 46.

the state of one's soul, exemplified by the connection made by the English between Indian appearance and their demonic practices.<sup>82</sup> The English, in short, interpreted indigenous dress and ceremonial accessories as clear signs of native allegiance to the devil, an outward reflection of an inner commitment to the diabolical forces of the temporal world.

More than native appearances shaped colonial views of the New World's indigenous population. English association of Indian rituals with diabolic practices cast suspicion on the native interaction with the supernatural and also on the natives themselves.<sup>83</sup> One example is a native ceremony observed by Reverend Alexander Whitaker in 1611 when traveling up the Nansemond River. Whitaker recorded that the English passed "on the shore a mad crew dancing like Anticks" with their native priest leading the procession while tossing "smoke and flame out of thing like a censer."<sup>84</sup> Whitaker linked this cause with its suspected effect: "exceeding thunder and lightening and much rain...All which things make me think that there be great witches amongst them and they very familiar with the devil."<sup>85</sup>

Percy recorded another intriguing story that demonstrates English perceptions of native supernatural powers. Percy claims that the English were victims of Powhatan "magic" that disoriented them. The colonists had gone to the falls of the James against the expressed wishes of Powhatan, and one evening, as they were sitting at prayer, safe behind their "trenches," they heard "a strange noise...coming out of the corn towards...our men[,] like an Indian 'hup hup' with an 'oho oho.'" Then English then fell into confusion, grabbing the wrong end of their guns and falling over one another, and they remained in that state for "half a quarter of an hour," after which "suddenly as men awaked out [of] a dream they began to search for their supposed

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<sup>82</sup> Bond, "Source of Knowledge," 4.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Alexander Whitaker to William Crashaw, August 9, 1611, in Alexander Brown, *Genesis of the United States* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1897), vol. I, 498-499

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

enemies, but finding none remained ever after very quiet.”<sup>86</sup> This episode not only illustrates the colonists’ association of Indian ritual with satanic practices, but also demonstrates the Englishmen’s belief in the power of magic and its effects on those colonists surrounded by the Powhatan. Regardless of the veracity of the Indians’ powers, the English colonists physically reacted to what they interpreted as the magical prowess of the Powhatan.

Whitaker made a similar claim in *Good Newes from Virginia* when he stated that native priests “are no other but such as our English Witches are.”<sup>87</sup> Bond insightfully notes that such a statement does not merely suggest contempt on the part of the English toward the Indians but also fear of the latter’s diabolic capabilities. Virginians in this early period mentioned witchcraft in order to point out the illegitimate possession of dangerous supernatural power. Individuals who could successfully utilize the supernatural universe that witchcraft posited possessed extraordinary yet perilous powers that could be used to harm others. Yet even as the colonists described the diabolic capabilities of the Indians, they offered them a backhanded compliment, for English treatises on the subject taught that to become an expert in the black arts one must possess great talent and self-discipline.<sup>88</sup> Natives who held such supernatural powers thus merited a certain amount of respect, as well as apprehension, from their English observers.

English apprehension about native religious and social practices contributed greatly to what would emerge as the dominant religious culture of early Virginia. Behavior rather than belief continued to define the colony’s public religious life, for behavior is what most obviously separated the English from the Indians.<sup>89</sup> “Religion ‘tis doth distinguish us [f]rom their brute

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<sup>86</sup> Percy, *A True Relation*; Helen Rountree, *The Powhatan Indians of Virginia: Their Traditional Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1989), 133.

<sup>87</sup> Whitaker, *Good Newes*, 4.

<sup>88</sup> Bond, “Source of Knowledge,” 4.

<sup>89</sup> Bond, “Religion in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” 168.

humor, well we may it know,” noted John Smith following his interactions with the Powhatan.<sup>90</sup> While a strong element of evangelism accompanied England’s plans to colonize Virginia, these religious plans quickly faded in importance and became non-existent following the Indian Uprising of 1622. “Establishing the natives as the other,” asserts Bond, “heightened Christianity’s importance as an English possession and at the same time shattered the mythic European concepts of religious unity.”<sup>91</sup> The English’s definition of themselves in light of the surrounding indigenous groups demanded the upholding of English civility and proper behavior in Virginia. As the institution of martial law under the *Lawes* in 1612 demonstrates, colonial lawmakers quickly became more concerned with the outward façade of Christianity in light of the heathen Indian groups that surrounded them.

Christianity served as the dividing line between the civilized and uncivilized peoples who lived only miles apart from one another in similar living environments. In the New World, Christianity and English civility were the major characteristics that distinguished the Virginia settlers from their Indian counterparts. Enforcing behavior resulted in an emphasis on action rather than on the motivation that accompanied the action, a distinctive feature of Virginia’s religious culture throughout the colonial period. Colonial authorities constructed in Virginia a religious system suitable to the North American context by accounting for human behavior and the physical and cultural environment of the new state, establishing early on a religious culture more concerned with public morality and social welfare than with stringent Anglican theology.

The religious beliefs and behavior of Virginia’s earliest colonists thus influenced the colony’s religious institutions and popular beliefs throughout the course of the century. The men and women who immigrated to the New World throughout the 1600s were products of the same

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<sup>90</sup> Smith, *The Complete Works*, vol. II, 125.

<sup>91</sup> Bond, “Religion in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” 179.

theological culture as the countrymen they left behind, and carried with them the early modern European belief in the powers of both divine and demonic forces over events in the temporal world and those who inhabited it. From thunderstorms and famine to diabolic native rituals, Virginia's earliest colonists experienced life in North America through the prism of Christian religion. Religion provided the majority of settlers a reassuring sense of protection in spite of what most likely appeared as survival against impossible odds. Early Virginians' pattern of worship and settlement profoundly influenced the formation of the colony's religious culture; what emerged in Virginia was a religious culture that emphasized morality over theology and action over motivation, the topical basis of chapter three. The nature of this religious polity greatly influenced Virginia's interaction with the supernatural world throughout the remainder of the colonial period.

*Chapter 2*  
*The Scandalous “Notion of Witches”: Witchcraft in the Virginia Colony, 1624-1705*

The supernatural world of the early modern period was filled with practitioners of both good and evil, with angels and demons, witches, fairies, and charms. The early modern belief in the supernatural did not exist autonomously from Christian religious practices; indeed, the natural and the supernatural were intimately linked in the minds of seventeenth-century peoples. People across Europe’s national boundaries and class lines accepted the existence of supernatural forces and their ability to both help and cause harm to communities and individuals in the natural world. The men and women who immigrated to British North America throughout the 1600s were products of the same theological and social culture as their English counterparts, and carried with them to the New World similar beliefs in regard to the powers of occult forces. While references to such beliefs certainly exist in seventeenth-century Virginia’s colonial court records and personal documents, relatively little attention has been given to this aspect of the settlers’ religious lives. The hysteria that plagued England and New England during the seventeenth century has frequently overshadowed the witchcraft trials that took place within Virginia’s borders during the same period, blurring the importance of the presence of both God and the devil in the settlers’ everyday lives.

As demonstrated in the previous chapter, Virginia’s earliest colonists first recognized the presence of evil in the surrounding wilderness and in its native inhabitants. The stabilization of Virginia society, accompanied by a steady rise in its population, soon led, however, to more traditional displays of fear and uncertainty: accusations of witchcraft by one individual against another. Occultism’s first appearance in the colonies emerged in Virginia rather than Massachusetts, again illustrating Virginia’s resonance with this important theme in American

religious history.<sup>92</sup> While the number of witchcraft cases in Virginia does not rival that of its neighbors to the North, the trials in Virginia testify to a strong belief in the supernatural on the part of the colony's inhabitants and the continued importance of religion in the lives of the colonists throughout the century.

Using the witchcraft cases of Virginia's Lower Norfolk County as an example, this chapter will illustrate how Virginia's experience with witchery both conformed to and differed from the witch trials occurring simultaneously in England and continental Europe. The colony of Virginia abided by English law in regard to accusations of witchcraft, but colonial justices interpreted these laws in light of the colony's physical and social environment. When formal or informal charges of witchcraft were made, the result in almost every instance was a countersuit for slander brought by the alleged witch, not imprisonment or death by rope or fire, illustrating how Virginia's courts broke with standard English precedent in regard to witchcraft accusations.<sup>93</sup> Thus, this chapter will in part seek to demonstrate how Virginia no longer serves as a suitable anomaly in early modern witchcraft, that Virginia did reflect certain theological and legal trends occurring simultaneously in England and on the continent. This chapter will also argue that trials pertaining to witchcraft in seventeenth-century Virginia do not demonstrate a reluctance on the part of colonial justices and juries to believe such accusations of harm were possible, but instead an obligation on the part of judicial leaders to maintain the colony's social and political stability in the century following its founding.

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<sup>92</sup> Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), 68.

<sup>93</sup> While most New England witches of the 1690s were hanged, there are some records of burning in British history, particularly in Scottish documents, and the practice was common on the continent. Only two defendants in Virginia received punishment for practicing witchcraft: in one case banishment and the other a minor imprisonment sentence. No one in Virginia was ever put to death for his or her alleged crimes.



*Precedent: The English Context for Virginia Witchcraft*

In his now classic essay, “The Devil in Virginia in the Seventeenth Century,” historian Richard Beale Davis concludes that witchcraft beliefs in Virginia “had more to do with folklore than theology,” that allegations of witchery were the inevitable outgrowth of folk beliefs carried by European settlers to the New World.<sup>94</sup> While Davis’ statement describes the common position of twentieth-century historians on the origins of Virginia’s witch beliefs, it ignores the importance of religion in shaping early modern beliefs about witchcraft and magic. The study of witchcraft demonstrates that such categories of analysis are not always so definite, that “[r]eligion and magic, far from being incompatible, coexisted side by side and were intimately linked in the minds of the people.”<sup>95</sup> Europeans of all social classes recognized the ability of both divine and demonic forces to influence acts of witchery and malefice, given the logically consistent place of demons and witches within the Christian worldview. Certain aspects of witchcraft no doubt have their origins in European folklore. Ideas such as the magical transformation of witches into animals and the night flight to the Sabbath are rooted in what appear to be the remnants of archaic shamanistic practices widespread in European culture.

In a discussion of European witchcraft, historians Alan Kors and Edward Peters argue that the problem of witchcraft “demands less the study of magic as pure folklore and the useful, but incomplete, results of anthropology than the study of the intellectual, perceptual, and legal processes” by which these beliefs were transformed by Europeans into and understood as systematic theology that required prosecution.<sup>96</sup> The study of witchcraft requires recognition of

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<sup>94</sup> Richard Beale Davis, “The Devil in Virginia in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Literature and Society in Early Virginia, 1608-1840*, ed. Richard Beale Davis (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 22.

<sup>95</sup> James Horn, *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, 1994), 412.

<sup>96</sup> Alan C. Kors and Edward Peters, eds., *Witchcraft in Europe, 400-1700: A Documentary History*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 5.

the inseparable connection between witch beliefs and religion in seventeenth-century Europe and North America. While these beliefs in Virginia were admittedly in many ways the result of European folklore, by the seventeenth century they were undoubtedly tied to the prevailing Christian theology of the early modern period.

Investigations of alleged witchcraft were inevitable in seventeenth-century European society. As a legacy of medieval theology, belief in the existence of witches was widespread and still almost universal through the sixteenth century.<sup>97</sup> However, in Great Britain as early as 1584 Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* pleaded for caution and rationality when prosecuting witches. Scot affirmed that "whatsoever is reported or conceived of such manner of witchcrafts, I dare avow to be false and fabulous," due to the lack of Biblical foundation for the existence of witches and the impossibility of acts confessed to by witches on the basis on natural law.<sup>98</sup> James VI of Scotland, soon to be king of England as well, answered Scot's rational arguments in his *Demonologie* in 1597, a treatise which seemed to James' contemporaries "a powerful reassertion of the necessity for faith in the existence of Satan's arts."<sup>99</sup> Soon after James' accession to the English throne in 1603, a new "Act against conjuration, witchcraft and dealing with evil spirits" superseded the witchcraft statute of the Elizabethan age, the new law being much more severe in its punishment of alleged witches.<sup>100</sup> The statute that had been passed by Elizabeth in 1563 forbidding conjuration and witchcraft defined the latter sin in terms of *maleficium*, physical harm, rather than an alliance between Satan and humans. The punishments inflicted for witchcraft under

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<sup>97</sup> Davis, "The Devil in Virginia," 22.

<sup>98</sup> Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (1584; Reprint, London: Printed for Andrew Clark, 1665). 6, 19.

<sup>99</sup> Davis, "The Devil in Virginia," 22.

<sup>100</sup> "An Act against Conjuration, Witchcraft and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits 1604," in *Witchcraft and Society in England and America, 1555-1750*, ed. Marion Gibson (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 6.

the 1563 act were firmly within the existing legal framework for dealing with felonies, and ranged from death for killing another human being using witchcraft to foreclosure and imprisonment.<sup>101</sup>

The act passed by James I in 1604 was harsher than the Elizabethan one, retaining the death penalty for causing death of humans by witchcraft and extending it to wasting, consuming, or laming persons and wasting, destroying, or impairing their goods on a first offence and all forms of witchcraft on the second.<sup>102</sup> The act also made it a capital offense to “consult, covenant with, entertain, employ, feed, or reward any evil and wicked spirit to or for any intent or purpose.”<sup>103</sup> The statute thus shifted the primary crime concerning witchcraft from *maleficium* to familiarity with evil spirits. Indeed, Wallace Notestein asserts in his monumental work *A History of Witchcraft in England*: “It can be easily seen that one of the things which the framers of the statute were attempting to accomplish in their somewhat awkward wording was to make the fact of witchcraft as a felony depend chiefly upon a single form of evidence, the testimony to the use of evil spirits.”<sup>104</sup> It was this statute concerning witchcraft that bound Virginians to investigate allegations of witchcraft, legislation they took seriously in their first century in North America.

*Witchcraft in Virginia: The Trials of Lower Norfolk County*

The majority of Virginia colonists did not need treatises by the king or noted theologians to confirm their belief in witchcraft; they had migrated to North America with a firmly held conviction of the existence of witches and their ability to cause harm. Like their English and continental counterparts, Virginians were most concerned with the harmful acts of witches centered around *maleficium*, the causing of physical harm or death of persons or damage to their

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<sup>101</sup> J.A. Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England, 1550-1750* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1996), 89.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> “An Act against Conjurat[i]on, Witchcraft and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits 1604,” 6.

<sup>104</sup> Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1911), 104.

property by occult means.<sup>105</sup> Familial death and sickness, crop failure, and the death of livestock were just some of the mundane misfortunes that seventeenth-century Virginians interpreted as signs of a witch's influence. Allegations of *maleficium* most always served as a response to personal misfortune. Indeed, what seems to have mattered most in the early stages of a witchcraft case was, above all, a personal conviction on the part of the victims that *maleficium* existed and that they were genuinely afflicted by it.<sup>106</sup>

Virginia's first case of witchcraft, that of Goodwife Joan Wright in September 1626, demonstrates the importance of *maleficium* in accusations of witchcraft, as well as how "community tensions and social interrelationships fed occult practice, fear, and accusation in America as in England [and] also how magistrates might tolerate beliefs and rituals that were illegal."<sup>107</sup> The evidence consists of a series of depositions attempting to prove Goodwife Joan Wright guilty of practicing witchcraft. Mrs. Wright lived in Surry County across the river from Jamestown and had formerly lived at Kecoughtan in Elizabeth City County. The case came before the General Court at Jamestown, acting perhaps as a grand jury, on September 11, 1626, with Sir George Yeardley, the governor, presiding. Since the outcome of the case remains unknown, we see in this case only what certain laymen thought and not what the judges decided.<sup>108</sup> The first witness against Mrs. Wright was Lieutenant Giles Allington, likely an educated man, who explained that after Goodwife Wright was passed over to serve as his wife's midwife because of her left-handedness, she became irate and "very much discontented." Shortly after this, "his wiefes brest grew dangerouslie sore of an Imposture and was a month or five weeks before she

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<sup>105</sup> Horn, *Adapting to a New World*, 413.

<sup>106</sup> Stuart Clark, "Witchcraft and Magic in Early Modern Culture," in *Witchcraft and Magic in Europe: The Period of the Witch Trials*, ed. Bengt Ankarloo, Stuart Clark, and William Monter (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), 112.

<sup>107</sup> Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith*, 68.

<sup>108</sup> Davis, "The Devil in Virginia," 25-6.

was recovered, at which time [the] deponent himself fell sick and continued the space of three weeks, and further sayeth that his childe after it was borne fell sick and so continued the space of two months, and afterwards recovered,” but again fell sick again and died.<sup>109</sup>

Goodwife Wright was also accused of other acts of *maleficium* by her neighbors. She allegedly prevented a hunter from killing game that was “very faire to shoot at.” Furthermore, a plantation owner’s wife, Mrs. Isabell Perry, testified that Goody Wright threatened to use occult powers to compel a suspected thief to make restitution: if the servant girl of Elizabeth Gates did not return some firewood that was stolen, Goodwife Wright would make her “daunce starke naked” unless the stolen goods were returned.<sup>110</sup> Rebecca Graye testified that Goodwife Wright prophesied correctly that Mrs. Graye herself, Mr. Felgate, and Thomas Harris should soon bury their spouses and that another woman who complained to Goodwife Wright that her husband was “a cross man,” was assured that she should bury him shortly, which also came to pass. Additional witnesses also accused Goodwife Wright of predicting the deaths of others in the community.<sup>111</sup> The case against Joan Wright was evidently not considered a strong one, as there is no record of an actual trial for witchcraft ever taking place. The evidence presented demonstrates how charges of witchcraft were so often born out of the grief and resentment of untimely deaths, allowing troublesome members of the community such as Goodwife Wright to serve as likely scapegoats for malefic wrongdoing. Witchcraft allegations provided those in grief, such as Lieutenant Allington and Rebecca Graye, with a comprehensible explanation for unfortunate events that otherwise had no rationalization.

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<sup>109</sup> H.R. McIlwaine, ed., *Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1979), 111.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 112, 114.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

Trials related to witchcraft in Virginia's Lower Norfolk County also serve as a valuable illustration of Virginia's relationship with witchcraft during the seventeenth century. Early colonists made little effort to colonize the region that would become Lower Norfolk between the Nansemond River and the Atlantic coast before the late 1620s. Pioneer land grants within the present area of Norfolk were made in 1620, but general settlement did not take place until fifteen years later. The territory which now forms Norfolk County was originally included in the early corporation of Elizabeth City, one of the four "ancient boroughs" which, together with the Eastern Shore settlement, composed the colony of Virginia in 1624.<sup>112</sup> The reasons for the belated colonization of the area are unclear, though it was likely due to the success and size of the city of Kecoughtan (present-day Hampton) in Elizabeth City County and adjacent communities. Any new settlements across the river from Jamestown would have to compete with powerful interests in Elizabeth City and Newport News.<sup>113</sup> Two primary motivations for the migration of people into Lower Norfolk in the 1630s were the continuing population increase in Virginia and the English government's clarification of its land policy. The growing population of the James-York peninsula encouraged planters and newly arrived immigrants to search for abundant cheap land either northward to the York or southward across the James.<sup>114</sup>

A striking feature of Lower Norfolk County's early history is the mix of different people who came to live in the county. Settlers from Elizabeth City and surrounding counties were joined by growing numbers of men and women who paid their own passage to Virginia, or were transported directly from England. Exact proportions are difficult to determine, but among free settlers of the 1640s it is likely that between one-third and one-half had recently arrived in the

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<sup>112</sup> George Carrington Mason, "The Colonial Churches of Norfolk County, Virginia," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (1941), 139.

<sup>113</sup> Horn, *Adapting to a New World*, 166.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

colony. Among servants the proportion would have been much higher.<sup>115</sup> Social stratification was an expected consequence of the influx of settlers who arrived in Lower Norfolk in the 1630s and 40s. The majority of Lower Norfolk's residents were small landowners, with a striking forty percent of the population owning fewer than 300 acres. Only nine men (10 percent) had patented more than 1,000 acres before 1650.<sup>116</sup> The majority of Lower Norfolk's population owned less than five hundred acres or owned no land at all, a possible explanation for why witchcraft allegations arose here in greater numbers than in counties in Virginia dominated by the colonial elite.

Trials pertaining to witchcraft in Lower Norfolk County (and later Princess Anne County) account for almost half of all such trials in Virginia's courts and represent well the colonial fixation on acts of *maleficium*; they also bespeak the high number of depositions in seventeenth-century Virginia based on slander.<sup>117</sup> Furthermore, the cases of Lower Norfolk County contain both the elements of witchcraft that were rooted in European folklore and contemporary ideas about witchcraft that resulted from early modern Christian theology. Lower Norfolk jurors had become so exasperated by mid-century with gossip and accusations of witchcraft within their county that they passed an act punishing those "diverse dangerous and scandalous speeches"; this was aimed at several women in the county, "terming them to be witches, whereby their reputations [were] much impaired."<sup>118</sup> While no records exist of any cases related to witchcraft in Lower Norfolk County prior to the passing of the 1655 statute, the act demonstrates that the

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 170-1.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 168-9.

<sup>117</sup> By the end of the colonial period, more accusers were convicted of libel in Virginia than accused convicted of witchcraft (seven were found guilty of slander/libel versus four convicted of witchcraft). See Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, chapter 4.

<sup>118</sup> Edward W. James, ed., *The Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary*, vol. III (New York: P. Smith, 1951), 152.

number of unofficial allegations in the county had risen by mid-century to the point of judicial concern.

The law was put to the test four years later, in December 1659, when Ann Godby was arraigned for “slanders & scandals Cast upon Women under the notion of Witches,” specifically for abusing the name of a Mistress Robinson in this respect.<sup>119</sup> Several depositions revealed how Mrs. Godby had slandered Mistress Robinson by calling her a witch. Ann’s husband, Thomas, was also called forward as he was responsible under the law for his wife’s actions. The justices decided:

Whereas Ann Godby, the wife of Tho. Godby, hath contrary to an order of the court bearing the date of May 1655, concerning some slanders and scandals cast upon women under the notion of witches has contemptuously acted in abusing and taking the good name and credit of Nico. Robinson’s wife, terming her as a witch...it is therefore ordered that the said Tho. Godby shall pay three hundred pounds of tobacco & Caske fine for her Contempt of the mentioned order.<sup>120</sup>

Quite interestingly, the justices were less concerned with the allegations of witchcraft against Mistress Robinson, which is indicative of Virginia’s response to witchcraft accusations throughout the century. Instead, they enforced the 1655 statute by fining Ann Godby for her malicious words, thus demonstrating the harsh stance of Virginia’s courts against paltry allegations of witchcraft. While the high number of slander cases in Virginia’s courts will be returned to in the next chapter, the Godby case demonstrates well the precedence Virginia’s seventeenth-century justices gave to preserving the colony’s social order over investigating unsupported accusations of witchcraft.

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<sup>119</sup> James (ed.), *Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary*, vol. IV, 36.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. Coincidentally, a law was passed in Lower Norfolk County in 1662 which included a provision to protect husbands from the acts of their “babbling” wives. “An Act for the Punishment of Scandalous Persons” held that a woman found guilty of slander will be punished by ducking should her husband refuse to pay the damages awarded the plaintiff. See Carson O. Hudson, Jr., “*These Destestable Slaves of the Devill*”: *A Concise Guide to Witchcraft in Colonial Virginia* (Haverford, PA: Infinity Publishing, 2001), 38.



The Lower Norfolk County records are also filled with accusations against supposed witches on account of malefic acts. In June of 1675, Captain William Carver, a justice of the peace and member of the House of Burgess, accused Joan (Jane) Jenkins of “being familiar with evil spirits and using witchcraft &c.”<sup>121</sup> There was already ill feeling between Carver and the accused over a property dispute, illustrating how witchcraft often served as a useful tool of revenge in quarreling communities. Either through the weight of the evidence or the captain’s influence as a gentleman of the county, a jury of both men and women was impaneled to search the Jenkins’ house and most likely Jenkins’ person as well for signs of guilt.<sup>122</sup> A common popular belief was that when a witch made a pact with the devil, he would mark that person with a hot iron or his tongue, thereby leaving the “the devil’s mark.” The marks were in secret places such as the armpits and most often near their private parts, and considered insensitive to pain. Satan purportedly also gave each witch an extra teat or nipple, so that a familiar, or servant of the devil, could feed himself from the witch’s blood. This was known as the “witch’s mark.” Searches for these marks were common in England and when found, they offered fairly substantial proof of a witch’s guilt.<sup>123</sup> The committee evidently found nothing, for Joan Jenkins was never brought to trial. Thus, not even the testimony of a Virginia Burgess member was enough to convict Joan Jenkins without corroborating physical evidence of her supposed wrongdoing.

More serious charges were brought against Alice Cartwrite in 1678. John Salmon of Lower Norfolk County accused Cartwrite of bewitching his child and causing its death.<sup>124</sup> The exact circumstances of the child’s death and Cartwrite’s role in it are unclear from the trial record.

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<sup>121</sup> Edward W. James, “Captain William Carver,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3, no. 3 (1895), 163-65.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> Hudson, “*These Detestable Slaves*”, 2.

<sup>124</sup> James (ed.), *Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary*, vol. I, 57.

However, the allegations made by Salmon were serious: if supported by evidence, they could lead to the accused being transported to the General Court at Jamestown for trial, and if convicted of the use of witchcraft in a human death, Cartwright likely would have suffered death.<sup>125</sup> Whatever evidence was presented to the justices is lost, but it is clear that they ordered a panel of women to search Cartwright for more substantial proof of her possible guilt. The panel testified that “having diligently searched the body of the said Alice [they could] find no Suspicious marks whereby they [could] judge her to be a witch; but only what may and Is usual on other women.”<sup>126</sup> As with the trial of Joan Jenkins, the lack of substantiating evidence proving Alice Cartwright’s guilt in the death of John Salmon’s child resulted in her acquittal, thereby avoiding the conviction and punishment so common in Europe for similar malefic acts.

The infamous trial of Princess Anne County’s (formerly Lower Norfolk) Grace Sherwood, dubbed “The Virginia Witch,” also incorporated the influence of both the folklore and sophisticated theology of Europe. As early as February 1697/8 and September 1698, James and Grace Sherwood had sued Richard Capps, John and Jane Gisburne, and Anthony and Elizabeth Barnes for defamation or slander. The Gisburnes had charged that Grace “was a witch and bewitched their pigs to death and bewitched their Cotton.” Elizabeth Barnes testified that “the said Grace came to her one night and rid her and went out of the key hole or crack of the door like a black Catt,”<sup>127</sup> without waking her husband, Anthony Barnes.<sup>128</sup> After witnesses against the

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<sup>125</sup> Hudson, “*These Detestable Slaves*”, 41-42.

<sup>126</sup> James (ed.), *Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary*, vol. I, 57.

<sup>127</sup> Elizabeth Barnes’ allegation that Grace Sherwood transformed into a black cat was not uncommon in cases of witchcraft in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In order to spread mischief without being detected or to escape pursuit, witches were thought to have the ability to transform themselves into an animal’s shape or form. The belief in transformation had its roots in European folklore, although it was later adopted by European theologians into the continent’s sophisticated demonology.

<sup>128</sup> Edward W. James, “Grace Sherwood, the Virginia Witch,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1894), 99-101.

accused slanderers were heard, a jury of twelve freeholders decided in favor of the defendants.<sup>129</sup>

It is possible, therefore, that the jury thought Grace Sherwood guilty of the crimes of which she was accused.

Four years after her husband's death, in 1705, Grace again appeared in court. This time she sued Luke and Elizabeth Hill for assault and battery and won her suit. The Hills immediately responded by accusing Sherwood of witchcraft. It is unclear how the problems began; surely tensions had been building up for a while before Elizabeth Hill assaulted Sherwood in December 1705. The source of their dispute may have been economic, as it has been with the Gisburnes some years earlier. Sherwood was already reputed to be a witch, and it is possible the Hills assaulted her because they thought she had bewitched Elizabeth. People believed that a victim of witchcraft could be cured by scratching the offending witch and drawing blood, so Elizabeth Hill may have assaulted Sherwood in hopes of removing the spell.<sup>130</sup> In January 1706, one month after Hill was convicted of assaulting Sherwood, the latter was formally charged with witchcraft. In February, after a long debate, the justices decided to form a panel of women to search Sherwood's body for witch's marks. A jury of twelve women found "[t]wo things like titts with several other spots." Interestingly, the forewoman of the jury was Elizabeth Barnes, who seven years earlier had claimed that Sherwood was a witch.<sup>131</sup>

The Princess Anne County court considered Sherwood's case again on May 2. Noting that they had failed to accuse her of any particular act, but there was "great Cause of Suspicion," the justices ordered the sheriff to arrest Sherwood and search her house for "all Images and Such like

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>130</sup> Rebecca L. Logan, "Witches and Poisoners in the Colonial Chesapeake" (PhD diss., Union Institute, 2001), 145.

<sup>131</sup> "The Virginia Case of Grace Sherwood, 1706," in *Narratives of the Witchcraft Cases, 1648-1706*, ed. George Lincoln Burr (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1914), 439.

things as may strengthen the Suspicion.”<sup>132</sup> A jury of women was summoned but refused to appear. A second panel was summoned to search her body as well as her house and likewise refused to appear, possibly indicating their fear of Sherwood’s powers or incredulity at the charges brought against her. Wishing to settle the drawn-out affair, the county justices ordered Grace Sherwood “by her own consent to be tried in the water by Ducking.”<sup>133</sup> This water trial was based on the theory that water, the element of baptism, would not accept the body of a witch. If she sank, she was innocent; if she floated or swam, she was guilty.<sup>134</sup> Sherwood floated even though bound, and afterwards was searched by five “ancient” women who “Declared on Oath that She [was] not like them nor no Other woman that they knew of, having two things like titts on her private parts of a Black Color.”<sup>135</sup> Sherwood was ordered into custody, although she most likely did not serve a substantial sentence in the county jail. No record exists of her fate following the 1706 trial, although she apparently survived any further ordeal, for there is record of a Grace Sherwood’s will dated August 20, 1733, and probated in 1740.<sup>136</sup>

The 1706 trial of Grace Sherwood stemmed from personal disputes between Sherwood and the Hills, in contrast to the 1698 lawsuits, which seemed to reflect hard times in the community. The death of the Gisburnes’ livestock and the failure of the crops resulted in the allegations raised against Sherwood, who had a longstanding reputation in the community for malefic behavior and ill will. Her trial demonstrates how members of seventeenth-century society considered untrustworthy could quickly become scapegoats for social and economic tensions. The

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 440; Logan, “Witches and Poisoners,” 146.

<sup>133</sup> Burr (ed.), *Narratives*, 441.

<sup>134</sup> Ducking never enjoyed formal legal status in England and most judges and justices were opposed to it. The practice probably originated on the continent; King James mentioned it with approval in his *Daemonologie*, and it was probably this royal sanction that encouraged ducking’s introduction in England. Its first recorded use in England came in 1612-13. It was widely utilized subsequently, although, as already mentioned, official judges were often ambivalent or hostile towards it. See James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, Chapter 9.

<sup>135</sup> Burr (ed.), *Narratives*, 442.

<sup>136</sup> Edward W. James, “Grace Sherwood, the Virginia Witch,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (1895), 19-20. The will was presented to the court October 1, 1740.

justices attempted to obtain multiple kinds of proof in Sherwood's trial including searching her house for images and her person for witch's marks as well as a ducking test; they would not accept her guilt without physical evidence to support it. That the name Witchduck is still used in reference to the body of water in present-day Virginia Beach in which her ducking test took place testifies to the rarity (and notoriety) of such methods of trial in Virginia and their outcome.

*Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century England and Virginia: Similarities*

The small number of historians who have commented on Virginia witchcraft tend to view the experience of the colony as an anomaly among the more hysterical outbreaks of accusations that occurred simultaneously in North America and Europe. A contemporary question in the study of European witchcraft is the extent to which England and its colonies embraced and were affected by the complex demonology of the continent. Such connections are difficult to prove in English records and even more so in those from Virginia. In *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake*, historian James Horn asserts that the "increasingly 'sophisticated demonology' that developed in Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries largely bypassed Virginia," evident in the fact that no Chesapeake witches were accused of devil worship or entering into pacts with demonic entities.<sup>137</sup> While it is true that Virginia's records contain no references to diabolic pacts or satanic worship, Horn's conclusion ignores the complex theology of witchcraft evident in some of Virginia's more interesting cases. Though references to Satan's influence in Virginia's cases of witchcraft may be few, this circumstance does not necessarily imply a lack of connection in the minds of the colonists between witchcraft and diabolical power. Such an assumption would ignore important tenets of Christian thought most certainly accepted by members of Virginia's gentry, and to a lesser extent, important tenets of popular belief as well.

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<sup>137</sup> James Horn, *Adapting to a New World*, 413-4.

As mentioned earlier, the connection between witchcraft and satanic influence in seventeenth-century England has become a point of contention among historians in recent decades. While historians previously tended to downplay the scale of England's witch trials and their relation to continental ideas about witchcraft, contemporary scholars recognize the significance of placing England in its European context and viewing it less as an anomaly and more as an important contributor to the developing demonology of the period.

The East Anglian trials of 1645-7 represent a major witch panic in England, comparable in scope to a number of similar trials on the continent. Indeed, there were few continental crazes which witnessed the prosecution of 200 witches in a six-month period, as was the case in East Anglia.<sup>138</sup> Historians who study the East Anglian witch trials have long used them to exemplify how English trials differed from those on the continent. Alan Macfarlane, for example, in his significant study of witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England, regards the Essex trials as different from their continental counterparts in that they supposedly lack any reference to Satan's influence at all, or to a supposed compact by the witch who exchanged her soul for diabolic power. Macfarlane concludes that "the impression from the Essex evidence is that those who brought the accusations were mostly uninterested in the supposed compact with the Devil, the loss of the accused person's soul, or any presumed attack on Christianity," thus downplaying both the theological and diabolical influences in these trials.<sup>139</sup>

The East Anglian witch trials, which took place over two years beginning in 1645, are now, however, cited by more recent scholars to demonstrate the complexity of England's dealings with witchcraft and the relation to the trials occurring simultaneously on the continent. Witches in the East Anglian trials were charged with and confessed to much more than *maleficium*. Trial

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<sup>138</sup> Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 130.

<sup>139</sup> Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: a Regional and Comparative Study* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1970), 189.

records demonstrate that many were condemned for consorting with familiar spirits; many confessed to keeping familiars, allowing them to suck their blood, to making pacts with the devil, and (less frequently) to having sexual relations with him. English historian J.A. Sharpe posits that the East Anglian trials “offer a challenge to that standard interpretation of English witchcraft which stresses its roots in neighbourly tensions and village disputes and tends to downgrade the importance of the devil and all his works in the popular thinking on the subject of the period.”<sup>140</sup> Earlier twentieth-century perspectives, such as those of Macfarlane and Keith Thomas, characterized the trials as atypical in their emphasis on diabolical influence. Sharpe concludes, however, that even if the trials of the 1640s are exceptional, they are too important to be dismissed as an “unEnglish aberration.”<sup>141</sup>

The influence of these new ideas on lay people was, of course, only partial, but the East Anglian trials demonstrate that a concern with malefic acts in trial records does not obviate a secondary concern with the possibility of the devil’s presence. In other words, the presence of one does not contradict concern for the other. While Virginia’s records are by no means as colorful as the East Anglian trials in regard to accusations and confessions, they speak to a connection between witchcraft and diabolical influence in the minds of Virginia’s seventeenth-century residents.

In July 1698, John Byrd and his wife Anne of Lower Norfolk sued Charles Kinsey and John Potts for defamation against Mrs. Byrd. The Byrds held that “Kinsey had falsely and Scandalously Defame[d] them Saying that the said Anne did ride him from his house to Elizabeth Russell’s,” and that John Potts had accused Anne of riding “him along the Seaside & home to his own house, by which kind of Discourse [the Byrds] were reported & rendered as if they were

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<sup>140</sup> Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 130.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

witches or in league with the Devill.”<sup>142</sup> Both defendants acknowledged that they had made such accusations, though Kinsey admitted that he might have dreamed of the ride.<sup>143</sup> Allegations of night riding were not uncommon in witchcraft; indeed, this idea survives to the present day with the image of a witch riding upon a broom.<sup>144</sup> A most noteworthy aspect of this deposition is the connection made by Potts between witches and the devil, the presumed source of Ann Byrd’s power. Diabolical influence is also implicit in the case presented against Elizabeth Dunkin in Westmoreland County. In 1695, Henry Dunkin accused John Dunkin and his wife Elizabeth of witchcraft and stated that Elizabeth boasted that she was regularly sucked by the devil.<sup>145</sup> The charge against Elizabeth was a serious one, as it implied a direct and physical relationship between her and the devil. The allegations against Ann Byrd and Elizabeth Dunkin clearly incorporate continental ideas about witchcraft and demonstrate that the differences between elite and popular notions of witchcraft are not always so clear-cut. The role of the devil in witches’ malefic acts was evidently of interest to the lower and middling sorts of the colony, even if their primary concern was not theological. The majority of Virginia’s inhabitants in the seventeenth century continued to view the world in terms of good and evil, and witchcraft was most often categorized as a form of the latter.

For historian Clive Holmes, the emphasis placed on testimony concerning the physical mark of witchcraft confirms the diabolic nature of English witchcraft. At Lancaster in 1634, for example, a case involving twenty accused witches culminated in the conviction of thirteen, all women, based on the presence of the witch’s mark on their bodies.<sup>146</sup> In a similar vein, Keith

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<sup>142</sup> James (ed.), *Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary*, vol. I, 20.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>144</sup> Hudson, *These Detestable Slaves*, 4.

<sup>145</sup> Alexander Bruce, *Institutional History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century*, vol. I (New York and London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1910), 284. The exact relation between the plaintiff and defendants is unknown.

<sup>146</sup> Clive Holmes, “Witches, Wives and Mothers,” in *The Witchcraft Reader*, ed. Darren Oldridge, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 277.



Thomas asserts that the notion that a witch bore on her body a mark of the devil indicates some sort of association in the contemporary English mind between maleficent magic and the devil.<sup>147</sup> As already shown, Virginia's courts often resorted to searches for the witch's mark when the testimony of the witch's accusers was not considered adequate for conviction. Furthermore, the presence of the mark could determine the guilt or innocence of the accused, as seen in the cases of Joan Jenkins, Alice Cartwrite, and Grace Sherwood. For James Sharpe, these actions and statements demonstrate that at least some of the lower-class members of English society "had acquired a basic awareness of the threat offered to the godly commonwealth by the devil."<sup>148</sup> It is important to note that even on the continent, the idea of witchcraft as devil-worship rather than *maleficium* was slow to catch on.<sup>149</sup> However, trials in both England and Virginia illustrate that the lower classes were at least familiar with the diabolical influences of witchcraft, even if the presence of Satan in their respective communities was not necessarily their main concern.

Satan's role in these cases was emphasized by some of England's most renowned theologians. Demonological treatises produced by English writers during this period demonstrate a deep concern for both the role of Satan in English witchcraft and the witch's relationship with the Evil One. William Perkins, the most distinguished English writer on the subject of demonology in the seventeenth century, defined a witch in his *Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* as "a magician who either by open or secret league wittingly and willingly consenteth to use the aid and assistance of the Devil in the working of wonders."<sup>150</sup> He asserted that bad witches turn to the devil "for the doing of hurt only, as to strike and annoy the bodies of men, women, children, and cattle with diseases and with death itself, so likewise to raise tempests by

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<sup>147</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 441.

<sup>148</sup> Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 141.

<sup>149</sup> Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 441.

<sup>150</sup> Perkins, "Good and Bad Witches, 1608," in *The Witchcraft Sourcebook*, ed. Brian Levack (New York: Routledge, 2004), 96.

sea and by land, etc.”<sup>151</sup> Post-Reformation theologians characterized this diabolic pact as the natural inversion of the covenant between God and the Christian, for, as Thomas Cooper, a leading English Protestant theologian during the sixteenth century, declared, “as God has his covenant with man: so will Satan have a special covenant also with his servants.”<sup>152</sup> For those committed to the new faith, Satan was transformed from a limited, rather peripheral figure into a central actor in daily life.<sup>153</sup> Particularly for Protestant theologians such as Perkins and Cooper, the ultimate sin of witchcraft was the heretical pact made with Satan, the forsaking of God in favor of his sworn enemy. It was for this reason, more so than the harm done to a witch’s neighbors and community, that witchcraft had to be stamped out of English society and those who chose to adhere to it severely punished.

There is evidence that many of the most well-known demonologies of the period could be found in Virginia in the seventeenth century. By 1621-22, the Virginia Company had sent a set of “Master *Perkins* his works” to the colony, a three-volume edition which included his *Discourse of the Damned Art of Witchcraft* noted above.<sup>154</sup> Furthermore, private libraries well into the eighteenth century included either Perkins’ *Works* as a whole or the *Damned Art of Witchcraft*.<sup>155</sup> William Byrd II also owned Perkins’ works, as well as a copy of Joseph Glanvill’s “On Witchcraft” by the early eighteenth century. There is no doubt, therefore, that many of Virginia’s leading citizens were familiar with the most well-known demonological treatises of the period and their arguments concerning the evil nature of witchcraft. It is safe to assume that other similar

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 85; Thomas Cooper, *The Mystery of Witch-Craft* (London: Printed by Nicholas Okes, 1617), 30.

<sup>153</sup> Darren Oldridge, *The Devil in Early Modern England* (Thrupp: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000), 24.

<sup>154</sup> William S. Powell, “Books in the Virginia Colony before 1624,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 5, no. 2 (1948): 180-1.

<sup>155</sup> “Libraries in Colonial Virginia,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1894): 132.

works on the subject were also present in the colony.<sup>156</sup> Although *maleficium* continued to be the primary concern of most lay people, the presence of these demonologies in Virginia confirms that many colonists, particularly members of the gentry, recognized the diabolical influence of contemporary witchcraft.

*Witchcraft in Seventeenth-Century England and Virginia: Differences*

The arguments of these treatises ultimately failed, however, to convince Virginia's juries and justices of the imminent threat posed by witches and their contract with the Evil One. Although demonological arguments were present in Virginia in print and in actual trials, they did not result in a widespread witch panic or even in a handful of guilty verdicts. The final chapter of this project will explore the role of Virginia's religious culture in precluding formal accusations and trials of witchcraft, but some preliminary explanations of other significant internal forces will be offered here.

Practically speaking, the settlement pattern of the Virginia colony made frequent interaction with (and conflict among) neighbors unlikely. One of the most obvious differences between English and New World society immediately apparent to settlers upon their arrival to Virginia was an "abundance of land and absence of people."<sup>157</sup> Covering about half the land area of England, the Chesapeake had a population of about 13,000 circa 1650, which could have easily fit in a small English county or London suburb. Low population density resulted from both the small size of local populations and a scattered pattern of settlement. Given the cheapness of land and the nature of the economy, it made sense for planters to buy large tracts of land and settle on or near convenient shipping routes. The system obviated the need for market towns in Virginia since trade was as dispersed as settlement. As a consequence, Chesapeake society failed to

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<sup>156</sup> Davis, "The Devil in Virginia," 24.

<sup>157</sup> Horn, *Adapting to a New World*, 139.

develop urban communities.<sup>158</sup> Anthony Langston wrote of Virginia in the 1650s: “Townes and Corporations have likewise been much hindred by our manner of seating the Country; every man having Liberty...to take up Land (untaken before) and there seat, build, clear, and plant without any manner of restraint from the Government.”<sup>159</sup> Thirty years later the only town of any magnitude was Jamestown, still small by European standards.

This pattern of settlement contrasted with those of England and New England, both of which favored proximity and interdependency among inhabitants. Hardly any people in England lived more than a few miles from a local town, at most an hour by road or across country. Immigrants to Virginia found the interdependency they had relied on in England, in many cases for survival, profoundly missing in the New World environment.<sup>160</sup> In early New England, a necessary condition of land grants was an agreement among multiple inhabitants to settle together and form a town. New England leaders favored relatively compact settlements in towns “to concentrate people sufficiently for defense, to support public schools, to promote mutual supervision of morality, and, above all, to sustain a convenient and well-attended local church.”<sup>161</sup> The daily interaction of New Englanders undoubtedly strengthened community ties but also unintentionally left room for animosity and bitterness among neighbors to develop, an unfortunate condition for witchcraft allegations in the early modern period. For example, in New England before the Salem trials, witchcraft was essentially a community-driven crime in which legal actions were directed against particular individuals.<sup>162</sup>

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>159</sup> Anthony Langston, “Anthony Langston on Towns, and Corporations; and on the Manufacture of Iron,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 1, no. 2 (1921): 101. (100-106)

<sup>160</sup> Darrett B. Rutman, “Assessing the Little Communities of Early America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 43, no. 2 (1986): 168-9.

<sup>161</sup> Alan Taylor, *American Colonies: The Settling of North America* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 170.

<sup>162</sup> Richard Weisman, *Witchcraft, Magic and Religion in 17th-Century Massachusetts* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1985), 15-16.

While Virginia's sprawling settlement pattern would hinder the growth of the colony's established church for the remainder of the colonial period, it appears in part to have protected the colony from the extensive witch prosecutions that occurred elsewhere in the New World as well as the Old World during the same period. Most Virginians lived miles apart from one another; this likely made impossible daily interaction, a necessary ingredient for witchcraft allegations based on *maleficium*. When witchcraft allegations did arise, colonial records make clear that malefic acts affecting relatives, land, and livestock were the colonists' primary concern. The lack of regular interaction among the colonists in seventeenth-century Virginia most certainly contributed to the lack of both extensive allegations and community pressure for convictions as well.

A final characteristic unique to Virginia's response to witchcraft arises in regard to the nature of acceptable evidence, particularly the admissibility of spectral evidence. Bewitched persons claimed to see the "spectre" of the person thought to be afflicting them, either in human form or in that of an animal. People who legitimately thought themselves bewitched could easily and honestly convince themselves that they could see the apparition and thus confirm in their minds the guilt of the accused.<sup>163</sup> Such testimony could include descriptions of a witch's spirit appearing to the witness, either literally or in dreams, as well as sightings of a witch's spectral image flying through the air at night. In some cases, the spirits were accused of causing physical harm such as choking, biting, or attempting copulation with the witness. Such accounts were used to demonstrate incriminating behaviors when the accused had not actually been observed engaging in them.<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 223.

<sup>164</sup> Dawn Hutchinson and Lori Underwood, "Witchery in the New World: The Foundations and Implications of Witch Trials in Colonial America" (paper presented to The Virginia Humanities Conference, Newport News, Virginia, March 30, 2007), 12.

Spectral evidence was used increasingly during English trials of the seventeenth century, although its acceptance was never conclusive among English court officials. The status of such evidence as a means of establishing legal proof remained dubious. In *A Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft*, John Stearne, an English witch-hunter during the East Anglian trials of midcentury, exhorts justices to remember that apparitions may proceed from fantasy and delusion.<sup>165</sup> Yet instances where this evidence was accepted increased in England beginning around 1650.<sup>166</sup> Later commentators record with horror how one Justice Winch condemned nine women to death at Leicester in 1616 on a witchcraft charge supported by the uncorroborated evidence of one boy.<sup>167</sup> Despite protests of numerous scholars and clergy, the practice of admitting spectral evidence was employed in the Massachusetts trials as well. As in England, the possessed were believed to be endowed with “spectral sight,” the ability to identify their invisible adversaries. The most infamous example of this gift in New England was the clarity with which the adolescent girls, whose accusations instigated the “witch craze” in Salem, could identify their tormentors.<sup>168</sup> As the Salem trials attest, many of those convicted and executed in New England were found guilty on the basis of spectral evidence alone.<sup>169</sup>

In contrast, the Virginia courts placed the burden of proof on the accusers. The courts were reluctant to hear accusations of witchcraft and were even more reluctant to convict those whose cases came to court. In practice, the Virginia courts seemed to have ignored spectral evidence, requiring physical proof of guilt through either searches for witch’s marks or ducking. In 1736, George Webb, a justice of the peace in New Kent County, published an essay on

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<sup>165</sup> John Stearne, *A Confirmation and Discovery of Witchcraft* (London: Printed by William Wilson, 1648), 39.

<sup>166</sup> Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness*, 223.

<sup>167</sup> J.S. Cockburn, *A History of the English Assizes, 1558-1714* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 120.

<sup>168</sup> Carol F. Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman: Witchcraft in Colonial New England* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 12; see also pp. 36-41.

<sup>169</sup> Hutchinson and Underwood, “Witchery in the New World,” 12.

witchcraft, arguing that “[i]nformation on witchcraft ought not to be received by [the] Justice of Peace, nor prosecution awarded thereupon, without strong and apparent cause, proved by sufficient witnesses, upon oath.”<sup>170</sup> Though prosecutions for witchcraft were rare by 1736 on both sides of the Atlantic, Webb’s essay demonstrates the stance of Virginia’s courts throughout the colonial period, a position contrasted by the actions of the courts of both old and New England throughout the seventeenth century.

Virginia’s response to witchcraft was, therefore, traditionally English, but also unique to the settlers’ colonial experience. Virginia’s legal relationship with witchcraft does not demonstrate reluctance on the part of its inhabitants to accept that acts of witchery were possible, but rather reluctance on the part of judicial leaders to upset the colony’s fragile social fabric by prosecuting unwarranted accusations of witchcraft. Thus the claim by early twentieth-century historians like Alexander Bruce that Virginians’ unwillingness to prosecute every allegation of witchcraft “shows that they were beginning to disbelieve in them thoroughly,”<sup>171</sup> ignores the fact that the Christian belief in the supernatural still prevailed. While Virginia’s seventeenth-century residents undoubtedly migrated with a belief in the existence of witchcraft, they responded to allegations as necessary in the colonial environment in which they were surrounded. The emphasis they placed on protecting the colony’s social order was encouraged by the religious culture that developed in Virginia during the seventeenth century, the systematization of which will be discussed in the following chapter.

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Bruce, *Institutional History of Virginia*, 284.

*Chapter 3*  
*Protecting Virginia's Social Fragility: Civil Law, Religion, and Public Morality*

In Lower Norfolk County in 1641, a man and his wife were found guilty of defamation for having “slanderosly and defaimously [sic] reported” against Anne Foster, “concerning her being delivered of a child, [and saying] that the said child was privately made away with,” for which the said defendants could offer no testimony or proof.<sup>172</sup> The court ordered the guilty man to pay Richard Foster, Anne’s husband, 150 pounds of tobacco, and additionally ordered that the accused and his wife receive twenty and ten lashes upon the back respectively. The two defendants were, however, graciously spared from both punishments by the entreaty of Richard Foster, who agreed to forgive the monetary payment and absolve them from corporal punishment so long as the guilty man and his wife agreed to “[a]sk ye said Anne Foster public forgiveness here in open Court and also the next Sabbath the minister preacheth at their parish Church before the Congregation...saying after the minister such words as he Shall deliver unto them.”<sup>173</sup>

The charges brought up in Lower Norfolk County concerning the soiled reputation of Anne Foster demonstrate a number of aspects regarding the legal system in Virginia; among them is the fact that civil prosecutions for slander were not at all uncommon in the colony’s early history. Indeed, the number of cases of this kind increased steadily as the seventeenth century progressed. Furthermore, the case illustrates how punishments for crimes such as slander could be both secular and religious in nature. Perhaps most importantly, the case involving Richard and Anne Foster demonstrates how Virginia’s justices overwhelmingly chose to prosecute crimes they considered a threat to the social cohesion of the young colony.

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<sup>172</sup> The court records have omitted the names of the guilty man and his wife. Edward W. James, ed., *The Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary*, vol. I (New York: P. Smith, 1951), 141-2.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.



The harsh conditions imposed by an unfamiliar environment and the geographical distance from England led colonists to modify the structure of Virginia's secular government and its established church. In aspects of civil and religious governance where life in the New World made the English model impossible to implement, colonial adaptations abounded. Perhaps nowhere is this trend more evident than in the religious lives of Virginia's earliest colonists. The lack of ministers and an ecclesiastical governing body in seventeenth-century Virginia resulted in an institutional church unique to the colonial experience. The Church of England in Virginia can thus be seen as a product of the instability, in religious matters and otherwise, that characterized the colony throughout the seventeenth century. Due to the instability of the colony (and the colonial church), a system of public morality and private faith had emerged in Virginia by the century's close, a religious culture implemented and promulgated by Virginia's ministers and leading citizens. Early on in its history, Virginia's colonial church thus became the handmaiden of a hierarchical society, an institution that supported control by the colonial gentry and vice versa.

This chapter seeks to determine the extent to which the influence of Virginia's religious culture, both institutional and private, accounted for the courts' skeptical response to unsupported accusations of witchcraft. In doing so, it will demonstrate how and why Virginians came to value private piety over public worship, and how the "desacralization" of Virginia's church contributed to the moderate relationship between church and state in seventeenth-century Virginia. Most importantly, it will argue that the reason witchcraft prosecutions failed to thrive in colonial Virginia was not due to a lack of accusations, but instead can be partly attributed to the sensible and private religious practices of Virginia's Anglican Church. With a severe lack of ministers, Virginians had to turn to something other than the institutional church to help establish and maintain the social cohesion of the young colony. Thus, the purpose of Virginia's legal system

became that of maintaining order by prosecuting crimes—such as fornication, gossip, and slander—that damaged Virginia’s fragile social fabric, and dismissing those, like witchcraft, that threatened to tear it apart.

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In his letters, William Fitzhugh, an attorney and tobacco planter who settled in Stafford County in 1685, reflected upon the many difficulties of living in the colonies. He complained of the lack of education for children and the instability of the colonial economy which forced him to devote more time to worldly affairs than he thought proper. Fitzhugh’s greatest dissatisfaction with the colony was the lack of spiritual comfort, a consistent complaint made by clergy and laity alike throughout the seventeenth century: “But that which bears the greatest weight with me...is the want of spiritual help & comforts, of which this fertile Country in every thing else, is barren and unfruitful.”<sup>174</sup> Like his societal counterparts, Fitzhugh’s writings express an earnest desire for the establishment of spiritual leadership in the colony, as well as an unmistakable devotion to daily religious practices. On at least two occasions Fitzhugh tried to address the problem by asking friends in England to speak to the bishop of London about supplying the colony with “able, learned, serious, & sober” ministers. His request, like similar ones made by others, usually went unanswered in the seventeenth century,<sup>175</sup> due both to the shortage of ministers that occurred simultaneously in England and their lack of interest in migrating to North America.

Virginia did not lack a public church during the colonial period, but the one that existed was weak due to a sprawling population and a shortage of clergy. Religious historian Edward Bond surmises that within two decades of American settlement the “Virginia venture had gone from a prophet mission announcing the Gospel to the New World to one in which religion hardly

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<sup>174</sup> Richard Beale Davis, ed., *William Fitzhugh and His Chesapeake World, 1676-1701: The Fitzhugh Letters and Other Documents* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1963), 203.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 168, 268.

mattered, not even the Church's traditional pastoral mission to the English people."<sup>176</sup> Bond's reference to the lack of the Anglican Church's "traditional pastoral mission" in Virginia highlights what little concern the English monarch had for the religious well-being of his citizens living abroad once Virginia became a royal colony—thus, his responsibility—in 1624. In 1662, a former colonial minister estimated that less than one-fifth of the colony's parishes were supplied with ministers.<sup>177</sup> No more than ten or twelve ministers served a population approaching 26,000. Some three decades later, in 1699, only twenty-two of Virginia's fifty parishes had ministers, even as the colonial population reached a remarkable 63,000 inhabitants.<sup>178\*</sup>

No matter how weak the church may have been, religion still mattered in the daily lives of many Virginians. The Anglican Church in Virginia taught that a regular devotional life was the key to evangelical obedience and that prayer and spiritual discipline could transform nominal Christians into those who consciously pursued the heart of God.<sup>179</sup> The diaries and letters of Virginia's early colonists reflect their acceptance of obedience as an important aspect of theology; God judged a good Christian not on theological understanding, but on a life adorned with good morals. This was a message espoused by the leading devotional writers of the day. The *Whole Duty of Man*, a favorite devotional tract of Virginians from the 1660s to the end of the colonial period, stressed the duty of faith. The devotional's author, Richard Allestree, advised readers to "fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man," advice borrowed

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<sup>176</sup> Edward Bond, "Religion in Seventeenth-Century Anglican Virginia: Myth, Persuasion, and the Creation of an American Identity" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1995), 174.

<sup>177</sup> Roger Greene, *Virginia's Cure: or An Advisive Narrative Concerning Virginia* (London, 1662), in Peter Force, ed., *Tracts and Other Papers Related Principally to the Origin, Settlement, and Progress of the Colonies in North America, from the Discovery of the Country to the Year 1776*, vol. III (New York: Peter Smith, 1947), 4.

<sup>178</sup> Bond, "Religion in Seventeenth-Century Anglican Virginia," 229.

\* Population estimates in Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 404.

<sup>179</sup> Anne S. Dent, "God and Gentry: Public and Private Religion in Tidewater Virginia, 1607-1800" (PhD diss., University of Kentucky, 2001), 184.

from Ecclesiastes 12:13.<sup>180</sup> According to Virginian John Page, “[a] good life is inseparable from a good faith—yea, a good faith is a good life.”<sup>181</sup> The importance of living a “good life” was often a theme in James Blair’s sermons; from the pulpit he espoused, “Good Morality is Good Christianity.”<sup>182</sup> William Byrd reflected in his diary that “[r]eligion is the Duty which every Reasonable Creature owes to God, the Creator and Supream Governor of the World.”<sup>183</sup> Virginians’ reference to religion in this way meant more than just performance of moral duties to satiate a judging God. Duty was a necessary aspect of the spiritual life of an Anglican, a response to the message of God undertaken in faith.

The hopes for economic success that drove the colony’s establishment ultimately ended any possibility the church had to encourage the importance of public salvation over behavior. By the late 1610s and early 1620s, the colonists began to spread out farther and farther from Jamestown to plant tobacco on larger tracts of land. Church and society in England and New England centered around towns and dense settlements that encouraged regular church attendance and social cohesion. By choosing to spread themselves across the countryside to grow tobacco, Virginians abandoned both. In 1622, Virginia Governor Francis Wyatt complained that the colonists were “so dispersed & [the] people so straglingly seated, that we were not only bereft of the friendly commerce and mutual society one of another in religious duties, the first fruits of civility; but were also disabled any way to provide for the common safety either against foreign or

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<sup>180</sup> Bond, “The Anglican Church in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” 282.

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>182</sup> James Blair, *Our Saviour’s Divine Sermon on the Mount, Contain’d in the Vth, VIth, and VIIth Chapters of St. Matthew’s Gospel, Explained; and the Practice of it Recommended in Divers Sermons and Discourses*, Vol. V (London, 1722), 253. James Blair (1656-1743) was an instrumental figure in the religious life of the colony during the last two decades of the seventeenth century, and subsequently, was founder of The College of William and Mary. Though originally published in 1722, this collection of sermons contains many of Blair’s late seventeenth-century discourses.

<sup>183</sup> Bond, “The Anglican Church in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” 245.

domestic invasion, the carefulest charge of Christian charity.”<sup>184</sup> The Reverend Roger Greene, clearly critical of Virginians’ dispersal into the countryside, complained that colonists lived like “Hermites...dispersedly and scatteringly seated upon the sides of Rivers...as might make their due and constant attendance upon the public worship and Service of God impossible to them.”<sup>185</sup>

In the aftermath of the Indian Uprising of 1622, Governor Wyatt was equally concerned about the colonists’ ability to gather together as a church body as he was for their safety against their enemies residing in America and beyond. This conflict between tobacco and religion would continue to grow as the decades progressed. Virginia’s colonists clearly wanted both wealth and religion, yet found it more and more difficult to satisfy the demands of both. For example, the colony had to modify the Church of England’s traditional religious calendar due to conflicts with tobacco season. This modification gave tobacco and the pursuit of wealth priority over traditional religious practices.<sup>186</sup> Virginians did not, however, merely trade in their religious beliefs for profit; such a thought would have been almost unheard of for a seventeenth-century Englishmen. While the tobacco culture of early Virginia did ultimately weaken the influence of the Anglican Church, Virginia’s inhabitants adapted. What one can see happening in the early years of Virginia is the emergence of a distinct colonial religious identity, one that valued private piety over customary public worship.

The tobacco boom of the 1620s also coincided with a period of instability in Virginia’s church. Virginia’s shift to a royal colony ultimately signified the crown’s lack of concern for the religious well-being of its citizens overseas, and a shift to lay power of the colonial church. The Virginia Company of London took its obligations to provide for the religious welfare and needs of

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<sup>184</sup> Susan M. Kingsbury, ed., *The Records of the Virginia Company of London*, vol. III (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1906-35), 656.

<sup>185</sup> Greene, *Virginia’s Cure*, 4, 13-14.

<sup>186</sup> Edward Bond, *Damned Souls*, 119.

its colonists seriously. Between 1607 and its dissolution by King James I in 1624, the Virginia Company sent no fewer than twenty-two ministers to Virginia. As a result, the ratio of clergymen to laypeople in early Virginia sometimes exceeded that of contemporary English parishes.<sup>187</sup> For example, between 1619 and 1630, no fewer than four ministers served Elizabeth City parish; the same was true for parishes in Henrico and Martin's Hundred. Such instances were few, however, and in the following years accidents, Indian attacks, and disease rid the colony of their clergy with disturbing frequency.<sup>188</sup> In 1620 perhaps three ministers served a colonial population of 2,200, and a decade earlier the Reverend Alexander Whitaker, recalling Christ's words in the Gospel of Matthew, complained in regard to the lack of ministers in Virginia that the "harvest here is great, but the laborers few."<sup>189</sup>

Because of scarcity of preachers sent by the English crown or the Virginia Company, it comes as no surprise that the spiritual lives of Virginia's seventeenth-century residents move from the public to the private sphere. Public behavior, particularly English notions of suitable sexual behavior and the virtue of labor, distinguished Virginians from the Indian groups that surrounded them (see chapter one). It was this shared morality rather than theology that united the colonists as English. In Virginia during the seventeenth century, "[f]aith retreated to the private conscience and the family dwelling."<sup>190</sup> The combination of Virginia's scattered settlement patterns, the shortage of clergy, and the colony's tobacco mentality resulted in a society that emphasized private devotion to God over public worship of Him, and worried more about theology in practice rather than theory. The problem was the structure of Virginia's Church, not its message.

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<sup>187</sup> Edward Bond and John Gundersen, *The Episcopal Church in Virginia, 1607-2007* (Richmond, VA: Virginia Historical Society, 2007), 8.

<sup>188</sup> Bond, "Religion in Seventeenth-Century Anglican Virginia," 174.

<sup>189</sup> Alexander Whitaker, *Good Newes from Virginia*, (London, 1613), Virtual Jamestown, <[http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts\\_date.html#1600](http://www.virtualjamestown.org/Fhaccounts_date.html#1600)>. Biblical reference: Matthew 9:37.

<sup>190</sup> Bond, "Religion in Seventeenth-Century Anglican Virginia," 227.

*The “Desacralization” of Virginia’s Church*

Faced with crises in leadership and pastoral care, the colonial laity began to take on a larger role in church governance than traditionally employed in England, ultimately developing a system that led to lay control of Virginia’s Church of England.<sup>191</sup> This “laicization” of the church would have important consequences for the colonial court system. The English crown granted control of the colonial church to Virginia’s government early in the seventeenth century, a decision which profoundly affected how crimes (and accusations of crimes) were punished in the colony and by which governing body. While a link between church and state certainly existed, this connection ultimately weakened the authority of the Anglican Church in colonial Virginia: the colonial church lacked the courts, officials, and customary functions of the Church of England, and the prominent role played by church leaders in politics and government.<sup>192</sup>

Following the dissolution of the Virginia Company in 1624, the presence of a formal institutional church evaporated in Virginia. Rigid compliance with the organizational forms of the Church of England was impossible, and colonial adaptations resulted. Unlike the Anglican Church in England, Virginia had no ecclesiastical court system, which meant no bishop for most of the seventeenth century. The minister James Blair attempted to establish a sort of church court upon his arrival in Virginia in 1689. However, the ecclesiastical court structure was no sooner set up than it was struck down,<sup>193</sup> and “[w]ithout bishops, deans, ecclesiastical courts, or centers for theological direction and education such as Oxford and Cambridge in the mother country, the day-to-day responsibility for colonial church affairs fell into the hands of the laity.”<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Bond and Gundersen, *The Episcopal Church in Virginia*, 15.

<sup>192</sup> James Horn, *Adapting to a New World: English Society in the Seventeenth-Century Chesapeake* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1994), 406.

<sup>193</sup> Darrett B. Rutman, “The Evolution of Religious Life in Early Virginia,” *Lex et scientia* XIV (1978), 204.

<sup>194</sup> John Frederick Woolverton, *Colonial Anglicanism in North America* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1984), 74.

When the king assumed control of the colony in 1624, power over the church passed to his agent in the colony, the governor. Lay control of the church was confirmed in October 1624, when the governor and his council decided that “all...Controversies Concerning the dividing of the parishes shall stand as now it doth until it be decided by A general Assemblée or by some other lawful hearing.”<sup>195</sup> Thus, in colonial Virginia, the secular government—the governor, the assemblies, and the local parish vestries-- held the ultimate responsibility for upholding the religion of the colony.<sup>196</sup> Only in the 1642/3 session of the General Assembly did its delegates establish a vestry system—lay members who managed the temporal affairs of the church—thus forcing lay authorities to create some form of church government. Virginia’s vestries, composed of the minister and two or more churchwardens, assumed powers unheard of in England, the greatest of which was the right to “elect and make choice of their ministers.”<sup>197</sup>

These developments demonstrate the secular control of the church governing system and the amount of power that laymen had, even over ministers themselves. The private, practical theology encouraged by the Anglican Church in Virginia complemented the hierarchical structure of early colonial society. Tobacco allowed seventeenth-century colonists to determine fairly easily who the haves and have-nots were in their society, and the church adopted the culture of the society at large. In the practice of religion, gentry behavior serves more as a dichotomy than a stereotype. In Virginia’s church, “the gentry used religion to support an exalted view of themselves and their privileged role in the social order.”<sup>198</sup> The gentry’s public time of worship

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<sup>195</sup> Henry R. McIlwaine, ed., *Minutes of the Council and General Court of Colonial Virginia* (Richmond, VA: Virginia State Library, 1979), 22.

<sup>196</sup> William H. Seiler, “The Church of England as the Established Church in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” *The Journal of Southern History* 15, no. 4 (Nov. 1949), 504.

<sup>197</sup> William H. Seiler, “The Anglican Parish Vestry in Colonial Virginia,” *The Journal of Southern History* 22, no. 3 (Aug. 1956), 312; William W. Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature in the Year 1619*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. I (1823; Charlottesville: The University Press of Virginia, 1969), 242.

<sup>198</sup> Dent, “God and Gentry,” 81.



was just that—public. They used public services to draw attention to their place in the church, their support for its ministry, and their belief in the worship experience as necessary to their covenant with God.<sup>199</sup> Rhys Isaac makes a strong argument for religion as an agent of social control in *The Transformation of Virginia*, in which he links the rise of evangelical denominations—which drew support mostly from the lower classes—during the Great Awakening to the unraveling of social authority, a religious event that threatened both the stability of Virginia’s established church and the colony’s hierarchical system that was centuries in the making.<sup>200</sup>

Emotional restraint was viewed as part of the gentry persona and lower classes followed this example, showing deference through imitation. It remains more difficult for historians to gauge the religious experiences of the lower classes in seventeenth-century Virginia since the personal records they left behind are scarce. We do know, however, that entire parishes requested ministers for their churches and traveled as much as fifteen or twenty miles to attend services. William Byrd II noted that the church he attended six miles away from his home “was the biggest congregation [he] ever saw in the country.”<sup>201</sup> Another colonist noted that parishioners “came without much finery, often barefoot, the men in shirts and breeches and the women wearing...thin

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<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>200</sup> Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982). It was this very system of social status as defined by wealth that evangelical denominations during the Great Awakening in Virginia reacted against, as Isaac argues. He sees in the rise of the evangelicals a great challenge to traditional religion and the hierarchical society it had created. Prior to calls for political freedom, evangelical sects during the mid-eighteenth century made substantial strides in introducing calls for egalitarianism in Virginia society, primarily on the grounds that all people, regardless of class, race, or gender, were equal in the eyes of God. While true political, social, and religious equality would not be recognized for some time in Virginia, the evangelical sects of the Great Awakening are, in part, responsible for diminishing some of the power held by the gentry in the public sphere.

<sup>201</sup> Louis B. Wright and Marion Tingling, eds., *The Secret Diary of William Byrd of Westover, 1709-1712* (Richmond, VA: The Dietz Press, 1941), November 13, 1709.

shifts in hot weather.”<sup>202</sup> Their attendance suggests far greater religious devotion among the colony’s lower classes than those who publicly flaunted their wealth.

The harsh conditions imposed by Virginia’s environment, geographical separation from England, and the absence of an episcopal form of organization led the colonists to develop their own modifications to the structure of the church in Virginia. When imperial control of colonial institutions was unavailable or inadequate, colonial supervision was substituted. Without church courts, religious violations became entirely civil matters. The secularization of the church placed control of Virginia’s institutions in the hands of lay constituents, important men concerned with maintaining the colony’s fragile social fabric in the face of physical, economic, and spiritual hardships. Thus, in Virginia there would be no pressure from the colonial church to prosecute supposed criminals on religious grounds, accused witches or otherwise.

Virginia’s court of law developed in striking contrast to that of England, particularly in regard to the dichotomous system of ecclesiastical and civil courts. The Virginia colonists adapted England’s legal system in light of New World demands. According to legal historian John Pagan, “[c]olonists brought English legal culture with them to the New World just as they transplanted the English language. Drawing on their heritage and innovating when necessary, settlers fashioned distinctive legal systems for each colony.”<sup>203</sup> Cases pertaining to witchcraft in Virginia were therefore tried by secular court officials, whereas in England witchcraft (and the related defamation suits) was considered both an ecclesiastical and civil offense.

Prosecutions for witchcraft in England’s church courts were fairly rare, but did occur. The prosecution in England of witchcraft as both a secular and religious matter demonstrates

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<sup>202</sup> Patricia A. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 36.

<sup>203</sup> John Ruston Pagan, *Anne Orthwood’s Bastard: Sex and Law in Early Virginia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 8.

Virginia's distinct departure from practices in the mother country and exemplifies the adaptation of Virginia's courts and church in light of the colony's North American experience. In the southwest province of Wiltshire in 1585, for example, the ecclesiastical courts heard seven cases pertaining to witchcraft.<sup>204</sup> In the Wiltshire village of Keevil a woman was presented at the archdeacon's visitation in 1604 "for that she is suspect of witchcraft."<sup>205</sup> Apart from the fact that she denied the charge, virtually nothing is known about her. More dramatically, in 1613, John Potticarie, one of the most prominent men in the Wiltshire village of Wyllye, accused one of his neighbors of having bewitched his child, and threatened "that [if] he die I will hang thee for it."<sup>206</sup> Apparently the child lived, but Potticarie nonetheless brought a charge at the quarter sessions.<sup>207</sup>

Prosecutions for malefic witchcraft in England were, however, more likely to be tried at the civil court of the assizes.<sup>208</sup> The assizes heard the most serious cases, which were recommended to it by the quarter sessions, the local county courts that met four times a year; the more minor offenses were primarily tried by local justices of the peace. The assizes acted as a circuit court system, a way to bring "justice to the door of the subject,"<sup>209</sup> though some prisoners may have remained incarcerated for up to twelve months while waiting for the next session of the assizes. The role of these courts in England was significant: "As a compromise between centralization and decentralization, assizes provided relief locally without endangering the essential uniformity and impartiality of the common law."<sup>210</sup> Next to larceny, which accounted for seventy percent of the cases heard by the assizes, the only consistently sizable groups of offenses

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<sup>204</sup> Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570-1640* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 68.

<sup>205</sup> *Ibid.*, 113-4.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>208</sup> James Sharpe, *Instruments of Darkness: Witchcraft in England, 1550-1750* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1996), 92.

<sup>209</sup> J.S. Cockburn, *A History of the English Assizes, 1558-1714* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 2.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

were those involving felonious killing and witchcraft. Although its occurrence was essentially local and erratic, witchcraft accounted for approximately five percent of all surviving assize indictments between 1558 and 1680. Refinements in criminal procedure in the seventeenth century, particularly the introduction of more stringent rules for the admission of evidence, drastically reduced the incidence of witchcraft trials. This circumstance demonstrated the relative anomaly of the East Anglian trials around mid-century. The involvement of the infamous witch hunter Matthew Hopkins in the trials in East Anglia in the 1640s did bring a glut of prosecutions but they were followed by a gradual evolution in judicial attitudes toward the crime of witchcraft.<sup>211</sup>

Though witchcraft remained primarily a civil matter in England, cases involving the alleged crime were not completely void of ecclesiastical pressures. By the seventeenth century, assize judges had grown accustomed to exercising their influence and aspiring to authority that was less judicial than political. While assize judges were not necessarily swayed by local public opinion, they still held overtly political positions and were often influenced by the judgments of their superiors and peers: “Frequent changes of emphasis and bewildering variations in official thinking on religious and constitutional issues served to emphasize the irreconcilability of judicial allegiances,” notes English historian J.S. Cockburn. “Charged with...the execution of peculiarly personal religious controls or unpopular expressions of prerogative power, the assize judges attained during this period a peak of governmental importance.”<sup>212</sup>

In contrast, New England’s theocracy undoubtedly allowed for religious influence in court proceedings, offering another comparison to the moderate involvement of theology in similar trials in Virginia. From both the courthouse and the pulpit colonial leaders implicated their

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<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 11.

citizens in crimes against God and community. During Salem's witch trials in 1692, minister Deodat Lawson warned Salem that the Lord was "lengthening the Chain of the Roaring Lyon...so that the Devil is come down in great wrath to Serve his own most Holy Designs, in the World." Lawson then addressed any in his audience who may have made a compact with the devil: "You are utterly undone forever,...Doomed to those Endless, Easeless, and Remediless Torments[,] unless God chose to show His mercy."<sup>213</sup> Hearing a minister speak about witchcraft with such conviction surely must have reminded Salem villagers of the proceedings they had witnessed in court that same day and begged the question: who among them had secretly compacted with Satan? In June of 1692, the Massachusetts council asked several Salem ministers their opinion of the trials. In their responses the ministers thanked the honorable rulers for their attempts "to defeat the abominable witchcrafts which have been committed in the country," yet warned them of Satan's use of the tool of credulity in cases such as those plaguing Salem, suggesting the council look to the works of William Perkins among others to detect those truly guilty.<sup>214</sup> The inextricable link between church and state in colonial New England meant that any offense related to witchcraft was interpreted as a serious threat to both the state and the Congregational church.

The lack of comparable sermons or public debates in Virginia may be partly explained by the differences in worship experiences between Virginians and New Englanders. A congregant's emotional display of his or her love for Christ was expected in New England, whereas ministers in Virginia frowned upon it. The emotional nature of witchcraft trials was, therefore, not at all out of the ordinary in seventeenth-century Massachusetts, where public expression was a necessary facet of one's faith and church experience. In stark contrast, Virginia's churchmen emphasized in

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<sup>213</sup> Mary Beth Norton, *In the Devil's Snare: The Salem Witchcraft Crisis of 1692* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 67.

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

their writings neither the “terrors of the wilderness stage” typical of Puritan writers nor the “mystical union with God” especially common at the time among Roman Catholics and Protestant sects such as the Pietists and Quietists. Furthermore, the Anglican Church did not require such public displays of one’s “new birth” salvation experience as the New England did to the North. Congregants wrote very little of the “rapturous joy of sinners” who gained salvation from a merciful God.<sup>215</sup>

Thus, overtly emotional experiences, religious or otherwise, had no place in Virginia’s Anglican community. Virginians encouraged private prayer and reflection on Scripture over participation in a boisterous church service. In *A Deed of Gift to My Dear Son*, John Page reflects: “[L]et us offer our first and best things to [God]. He hath deserved the priority of our service; therefore let our first study, in the morning, and our last at night be, to seek God by prayers with devout reverence.”<sup>216</sup> These were the actions a devout Christian should perform to demonstrate his or her dedication to God, not a public salvation experience or emotional outcries of one’s love for Christ.

Unlike New Englanders, Virginians treated witchcraft primarily as a secular matter. Virginia’s justices and judges undoubtedly fell victim to local social and political influences, but the colony’s established church seldom exerted influence over secular court proceedings pertaining to witchcraft.<sup>217</sup> The county courts, which heard the majority of Virginia’s trials concerning witchcraft allegations, grew significantly in importance throughout the seventeenth century. From 1607 to 1619, the governor and Council in Virginia served as the only sources of

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<sup>215</sup> Bond, “The Anglican Church in Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” 237.

<sup>216</sup> Page, *A Deed of Gift to My Dear Son*, 74.

<sup>217</sup> Ecclesiastical influence is identifiable in only one known trial in Virginia, in which a minister was the plaintiff. In Northumberland County in November 1656, David Lindsaye, brought accusations against William Harding for “witchcraft, sorcery, etc.” See Richard Beale Davis, “The Devil in Virginia in the Seventeenth Century,” in *Literature and Society in Early Virginia, 1608-1840*, ed. Richard Beale Davis (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 30.

judicial power in the colony, yet as settlements during the 1620s and 1630s moved colonists farther away from the judicial seat at Jamestown, the provincial government delegated increasing amounts of responsibility to county magistrates (called commissioners until 1662 and justices of the peace thereafter). Most justices were “largely self-made men who achieved economic preeminence by establishing extensive commercial networks, arranging advantageous marriages, and accumulating land and servants.”<sup>218</sup> Their wealth in turn helped them gain political power and social status. Justices of the peace held a substantial amount of power; “The Courts of Justice are not distinct as in England,” a late seventeenth-century report noted, “but Causes belonging to Chancery, King’s Bench, Common Pleas, Exchequer, Admiralty, and Spirituality are decided altogether in one and the same Court.”<sup>219</sup> The delegation of legal procedure in England’s courts was clearly not adopted in the nation’s first colony; Virginia’s county courts handled it all.

The jurisdiction of the General Court at Jamestown and county courts overlapped to some degree, though each had an exclusive domain as well. Under a 1662 law, only the General Court could try “criminal cases that concern either life or member.”<sup>220</sup> County magistrates did perform important screening and evidence-gathering functions in capital cases, however. Justices of the peace examined witnesses and suspected felons and, if the evidence warranted, handed over defendants for trial by the General Court.<sup>221</sup> Witchcraft cases exemplify this process. Though witchcraft was considered a capital offense, cases concerning its practice seldom made it past the screening process at the county level.

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<sup>218</sup> Pagan, *Anne Orthwood’s Bastard*, 51.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>220</sup> Hening, *Statutes at Large*, vol. II, 63.

<sup>221</sup> Pagan, *Anne Orthwood’s Bastard*, 57-62.

Pagan asserts that since justices of the peace were often church wardens, there existed in seventeenth-century Virginia a strong link between church and state.<sup>222</sup> While an intertwinement between church and state undoubtedly existed in Virginia, its implementation weakened the power of the Anglican Church in the colony's public sphere. The secularization of Virginia's established church meant that those who held civil and religious power were one and the same; acting in the best interest of one public institution consequently meant acting in the best interest of the other. The purpose of the legal system in Virginia "was to maintain order, protect and enhance property, and safeguard reputations,"<sup>223</sup> the same of which can be said for the colony's established church. While Virginia's justices and judges were for the most part impartial, they did not neglect opportunities to interpret laws in ways that coincided with their own interests and those of the colony. In light of the young colony's fragile state, the governing bodies of Virginia during the seventeenth century chose to prosecute crimes that posed no threat to the colony's order and disregard those that could potentially disrupt its social cohesion.

#### *Civil Law, Religion, and Social Cohesion*

Virginia's colonial records suggest the importance of religion in maintaining social community in the unstable yet growing colony. Accounts in the county court records demonstrate the colonists' abiding fear that actions God found offensive might bring his wrath. For example, charges for not observing the Sabbath appear often and the Assembly noted it particularly in 1631/32 as an act that "almighty God may justly punish his people for neglecting."<sup>224</sup> Typical penalties combined civil and religious sanctions, most often a fine, which was used to keep the church in good repair, and public acknowledgement of error before the congregation, a deeply

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>224</sup> Hening, *Statutes at Large*, vol. I, 155; Edward Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony: Religion in Seventeenth-Century Virginia* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000), 125.



humiliating experience that aimed at reconciliation for the guilty party and deterrence for the witnesses.<sup>225</sup> In 1648, Oliver Segar of the new Poquoson parish in York County was charged by the grand jury for the offense of fishing on Sunday, a crime compounded by the fact that he had missed the sacrament of communion. For his errors, the county court ordered him to build a bridge to the parish church across a swamp, the previous pathway having been destroyed.<sup>226</sup> A fine of one hundred pounds of tobacco was imposed on Thomas Williams of Lower Norfolk County for getting drunk on the Sabbath, and he was ordered to pay the amount into the county treasury.<sup>227</sup> As previously noted, the Lower Norfolk County court charged the entire population of the county with a breach of the Sabbath, though the charges were mitigated by the “want of a godly Minister” in the county.<sup>228</sup>

Along with Sabbath breaking other transgressions not only offensive to God but also threatening to the stability of the community, such as fornication, gossip, and slander, are recorded: “When it came to social control, Virginia’s courts were particularly interested in punishing offenses that threatened social harmony.”<sup>229</sup> Consequences for fornication could include both civil and religious consequences, ranging from physical punishment to a public apology in the church for grievances committed. For example, in 1627, the General Court at Jamestown ordered that John Phillips and Joan White “shall be whipped at ye post at James Citty & receive 40 stripes a piece” and “be separated and not suffered to come together” for their fornication. The crime was considered particularly egregious because the unwed Joan White bore

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<sup>225</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls*, 125; Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage*, 3.

<sup>226</sup> Philip Alexander Bruce, *Institutional History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century: An Inquiry into the Religious, Moral, Educational, Legal, Military, and Political Condition of the People Based on Original and Contemporary Records* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1910), 29-30.

<sup>227</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>228</sup> James, ed., *The Lower Norfolk County Virginia Antiquary*, vol. III, 29.

<sup>229</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls*, 125.

Phillips' child.<sup>230</sup> Whereas English moralists may have worried about fornication provoking God's wrath and the devout of the colony may have shown concern over the sin's effect upon the sinner's soul, many people worried more practically about fornication's impact on their finances since the local community had to support the illegitimate child.<sup>231</sup> The crime of fornication, the ramifications of which were sometimes felt by the entire community, was not taken lightly in Virginia's colonial courts.

Gossip and slander could prove particularly disruptive to society by setting neighbors at odds with one another and perhaps leading them to take sides in disputes, thus damaging Virginia's delicate social fabric.<sup>232</sup> As demonstrated in the previous chapter, slander cases related to witchcraft allegations greatly outnumbered actual prosecutions for witchery in seventeenth-century Virginia. In cases of witchcraft where little evidence existed—as was the case in most of Virginia's suits—the most significant threat to the community was conviction, which may have led to further accusations and hysteria. To avoid this possible outcome, justices dismissed unsubstantiated cases of witchcraft and prosecuted the accusers for slander, who found themselves “under an ill tongue.”<sup>233</sup> The volume of defamation suits in Virginia's courts steadily increased as the seventeenth century progressed, a trend no doubt influenced by their growing frequency in England's courts during the period as well.<sup>234</sup> Suits alleging defamation of character, though mostly concerned with sexual misconduct, formed one of the most prominent types of litigation handled by England's church courts in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and were becoming increasingly popular in the secular courts as well. In fact, the rush to take legal action to

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<sup>230</sup> McIlwaine, ed., *Minutes of the Council and General Court*, 155.

<sup>231</sup> Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage*, 286.

<sup>232</sup> Bond, *Damned Souls*, 127.

<sup>233</sup> The quotation comes from the case regarding allegations of witchcraft made against Mrs. Christopher Neal of Northumberland County, Virginia. See “The Good Luck Horseshoe,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 17, no. 4 (1909): 247-248.

<sup>234</sup> Clara Ann Bowler, “Carted Whores and White Shrouded Apologies: Slander in the County Courts of Seventeenth-Century Virginia,” *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 85 (1977): 421-2.

clear sullied reputations has been called “a phenomenon of the age.”<sup>235</sup> Church law required that slanderous words must have referenced a crime punishable in a public court, and while ecclesiastical courts recognized no distinction between crimes punishable in their courts and the King’s courts, civil authorities often argued that defamation suits relating to offenses under secular jurisdiction should not be tried in church courts. Although uttering slurs such as “whore” or “harlot” were crimes traditionally punishable under ecclesiastical law, Virginia litigators included civil punishments to leave no question as to its designation as a civilly punishable crime rather than a moral offense.<sup>236</sup>

The majority of defamation suits against Virginians were civil suits. Slander, however, did result in both civil and ecclesiastical punishments. In addition to physical or monetary punishments, justices imposed mandatory public penance on those found guilty of slander. Asking for forgiveness of a sin on Sunday in front of the congregation gathered for worship and similar penalties were all forms of penance, undertaken not so much for retribution but “for the soul’s health,” to restore sinners to a healthy relationship with God and their neighbors.<sup>237</sup> In the Accomack-Northampton county court in 1642, for example, defendant Robert Wyard, found guilty of damaging the reputation of Alice Travellor, was ordered to “stand three several Sundays in the time of divine service before the face of the whole congregation in a white sheet with a white wand in his hand...And there shall Ask the said Alice forgiveness in form and manner as shall be Dictated unto him by the minister.”<sup>238</sup> Lower Norfolk County was clearly not the only county in Virginia that suffered from gossiping citizens. The Virginia legislature recognized in 1662 that “many vexatious persons do very much trouble the courts and their neighbors for

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<sup>235</sup> Qtd. in Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage*, 292.

<sup>236</sup> Bowler, “Carted Whores and White Shrouded Apologies,” 414.

<sup>237</sup> Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage*, 3.

<sup>238</sup> Susie M. Ames, ed., *County Court Records of Accomack-Northampton, Virginia, 1640-1645* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973), 235-6.

babbling words, sometimes passionately but not maliciously spoken,” and that same year issued legislation which enacted that “no action be admitted for defamation in any court, where the words are not actionable; and further that there be no words actionable but such as if true might have brought the person to suffer punishment by the law.”<sup>239</sup> At both the county and colonial level, justices and legislators in the seventeenth century made censoring slander and gossip within their jurisdiction a priority. From the 1662 provision one realizes the amount of effort put forth by Virginia’s legislators to quiet its colonists’ slanderous tongues, in hopes of protecting the young colony from the hysteria that can accompany such damaging accusations.

The unique physical, economic, and social environments of Virginia in the seventeenth century resulted in a religious and political culture very different from what the colonists had left behind in England. The emergence in Virginia of a religious system based on public morality and private devotion and the subsequent secularization of its colonial church resulted in an ecclesiastical system—in addition to a secular government—dominated by the colonial elite. These men acted in the best interest of both institutions in the public sphere and intentionally chose to prosecute offenses they considered detrimental to the social cohesion of the colony. It is clear from the colonial records that the civil and religious leaders of early Virginia did not consider the crime of witchcraft such an offense. Colonial justices overwhelmingly chose to dismiss unsubstantiated allegations of witchcraft and instead prosecute those in their jurisdiction whose slanderous tongues threatened to undermine the community’s solidarity. Their conscious decision to do so ultimately saved the colony from the societal fallout evident in other areas plagued by large-scale prosecutions for witchcraft, and quite possibly, from the failure of the Virginia experiment itself.

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<sup>239</sup> Qtd. in Susie M. Ames, *Studies of the Virginia Eastern Shore in the Seventeenth Century* (Richmond: The Deitz Press, 1940), 188.

### *Conclusion*

Seventeenth-century Virginians' relationship with the supernatural, from the moment they first encountered America's native population to their prosecution of Grace Sherwood in 1705, demonstrate a firm belief in the powers of both the divine and diabolic in the temporal world. Throughout their first century of New World colonization, Virginians continually turned to religion to explain the unexplainable and found comfort in God's perceived control of events in this world and in the next. Thanking God for safe travel across the Atlantic, associating the Powhatan Indians with His diabolical nemesis, accusing neighbors of witchery when crops failed and lands become the subject of disputes, and making one's home a sanctuary for God's presence when an unstaffed parish was not enough were just some of the mundane actions completed by Virginia's seventeenth-century citizens that today reveal so much about who they were and the important place religious beliefs held in their daily lives. As such instances demonstrate, much of Virginians' daily interactions with the divine took place outside the walls of the colony's established church.

Through the prism of witchcraft, this project has sought to demonstrate the important role of religion in the lives of Virginia's seventeenth-century colonists, and how the hierarchical structure of Virginia's society and church throughout the colonial period came to be. Perhaps most importantly, this project has shown how the hierarchical nature of seventeenth-century society, particularly the control of both secular and church government by the colonial elite, affected the colony's reaction to accusations of witchcraft and contributed to the religious culture of early Virginia—a culture that would come to characterize Virginia's interaction with the divine for the remainder of the colonial period and beyond. While the stratified nature of both institutions has never been questioned by historians, approaching the history of the colony

through its relationship (and reaction) to witchcraft has hopefully afforded the reader a better understanding of its citizens' religious practices, and why the colony benefited and ultimately succeeded by consciously choosing not to prosecute alleged practitioners of witchcraft. As the colony's response to the crime of witchcraft illustrates, Virginians were most concerned with punishing crimes that threatened the unstable structure of Virginia society, a reaction profoundly affected by the unique intertwinement of secular and religious governance in the seventeenth century.

The early colonists' interaction with Virginia's terrain, native peoples, and with one another resulted in a religious culture that emphasized appropriate behavior over belief in order to protect the fragile social fabric of Virginia. The colony's religious culture certainly complemented its established church. Anglicanism in Virginia was primarily a pastoral religion, one concerned more with the spiritual care of its congregants than tenants of theological and intellectual thought. Ministers' sermons, devotional materials, and events in the natural world all pointed the faithful in the direction of God, and also toward a reflective and private faith that allowed colonists to pursue a relationship with God at their own discretion. As historian Edward Bond asserts, however, a "quiet and unpretentious religious life" does not necessarily "show evidence of a lukewarm faith...And the view fails to square with what we know of the growing importance of religion to Virginians and of their continuing desire for ministers."<sup>240</sup> In regard to the important place occupied by the divine in their lives, Virginians were much like other English people. Though the structure of the Anglican Church in Virginia was less than ideal, it still helped order an individual's spiritual life. By the close of the seventeenth century, Virginians had taken the final resting place of their souls into their own hands, finding in religion comfort that God was in

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<sup>240</sup> Edward Bond, *Damned Souls in a Tobacco Colony: Religion in Seventeenth-Century Virginia* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 140.

control and their future in Him was secure, though the future of England's colonial venture in Virginia's daunting and unstable environment was not.

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