

315 years after Salem trials, who are today's 'witches'?

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By Lydia Hailman King

NASHVILLE — “Witch hunts” continue in society today despite the American ideal of pluralism, speakers said in a lively First Amendment Center panel Oct. 3 exploring which groups are demonized and why.

The First Amendment-protected freedoms of speech, religion and association formed the context for the program, “Today’s Witches: Revisiting *The Crucible*, A Conversation on the Power of Fear.” Five panelists from a variety of backgrounds discussed why society may perceive them and others as “witches,” in the sense of demonized “others,” because of their religious and political beliefs, ethnicity or sexual orientation. Nearly 150 people attended the event at the John Seigenthaler Center.

The panelists were: Hedy Weinberg, executive director of ACLU Tennessee; Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission; Arsalan Iftikhar, contributing editor of *Islamica* magazine; Chris Sanders, president of the Tennessee Equality Project; and Tim Bolton, an atheist.

The event served as a prelude to the Nashville performance of Arthur Miller’s play, *The Crucible*, based on the 1692 Salem witch trials in Puritan New England after which more than 20 men and women were executed for witchcraft. Miller’s play, written during the Red Scare and McCarthyism, won the 1953 Tony Award and is considered a revolutionary work.

Tennessee Repertory Theatre members were on hand to deliver a scene from *The Crucible*. A two-week run of the play began at TPAC’s Polk Theater starting Oct. 4.

Opening the program, First Amendment Center founder John Seigenthaler told the audience that throughout history many society members, perhaps including himself, had been considered “witches,” from Federalists, Republicans, Democrats and Whigs to Baptists, Jews, Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses, African-Americans, suffragists, anti-war protesters, Muslims, liberals, gays, fundamentalist Christians and others.

Witch hunts continue today, the panelists asserted in a conversation led by Gene Policinski, vice president and executive director of the First Amendment Center.

Iftikhar pointed to discriminatory treatment of Muslims in the United States after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, while Bolton noted that the word “atheist” has a negative connotation in America, and atheists are sometimes viewed as lower-class citizens. Sanders said some people project stereotypes on entire minority groups, such as homosexuals, but that gays would “continue to resist the demonization of themselves, sometimes with action and sometimes with humor.”

Land said evangelical and fundamentalist Christians had been labeled wrongly as “poor, uneducated and easily led,” and added that if the panel stage had been bigger, it also could have accommodated illegal immigrants and African-Americans as witch-hunt victims.

Weinberg defended herself and the ACLU as modern-day “witches” with an important mission: “If being a witch means protecting an individual’s right to practice their faith, standing in protection against government and defending the Bill of Rights, then we are guilty and actually happy to be called names,” she said.

“We represent minority viewpoints, and rather than use the term (witches) derogatorily, we would take the label proudly.”

Asked why “witches” still exist today, panelists cited many reasons, including the post-9/11 climate, fear, opportunism, ignorance, and the desire for scapegoats.

“I think there’s a fatal flaw in human nature that makes us want to make scapegoats,” Land said, “and to make us distrust others and act uncharitable toward those who are different. We need to acknowledge [the flaw] in our ourselves and guard against it.”

One member of the audience wanted to know who the witch-hunters were today.

Weinberg responded that the majority population can become witch-hunters, and her organization often represents the interests of the minority. Iftikhar said the establishment leads the witch hunt, but it is constantly changing, as are the witches.

Policinski asked the evening’s final question: Is it possible to have a time without witches?

No, the panelists said. All five speakers agreed that witches would continue to exist in America.

“From the Salem witch trials to today, this is what makes America the most wonderful social experiment,” said Iftikhar. “I think we’ll always have the concept of the ‘other’ because as we become a shrinking global community and as we become more politicized, unfortunately we’re going to continue to see that trend.”

Bolton offered a possible solution to witch hunts in better education and increased tolerance. Sanders called discussion the beginning of political action. Land, though he said demonization would persist, stressed diversity over conformity: “the harmony and not the melody of our nation.”

Despite the strongly held and sometimes controversial beliefs of panel members, a tone of mutual understanding and openness was maintained throughout the two-hour dialogue. “I would have thought we’d have a food fight by now,” Seigenthaler joked toward the end.

He concluded by saying, “I hope each of us will take away a sense of community and a sense of tolerance for witches of all sorts.”

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