

"A Dissenter Church Turned Established:
The Twisted Maturation of Church-State Principles in Early New England"

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Since Max Weber and Ernst Troeltsch set forth the typology of religious communities, Puritan "sects" have gathered the attention of historians and sociologists for the role they played in shaping the contours of modern civil society. While the English dissenters have been credited as the originators of ideas such as toleration and church-state separation, their political stance dramatically changed when they moved across the Atlantic and found themselves on the establishment side in New England. This article examines the history of a Baptist church in seventeenth-century Massachusetts and finds the development of the principle of church-state separation not as straightforward as has been suggested.

Puritans sailed to the new world for religious freedom, but they did not think that Baptists and Quakers had the same right to their own versions of freedom. The idea of toleration was a luxury for those engaged in the hard work of constructing a new society in the wilderness, especially when their home government watched them with suspicion of anarchy and rebellion. On the other hand, Baptists in New England formed a new town in order to have a church of their own. Founded in 1667 as one among the earliest on the American Continent, the Baptist church in Swansea, MA, thus became the established church of the town, and as such they sought to collect compulsory tithes from the inhabitants in order to support their church and clergy. By today's standard and by their former demand for church-state separation back in England, this would constitute a clear violation of the principle of separation, but the records show that they did not see it as an issue initially. Even when it did become an issue afterwards for those Congregational dissenters in the town, it was primarily seen as a case of fairness in shouldering the necessary cost, or a proper allocation of the cost and the benefit, and not as an infringement of their fundamental rights to dissent in matters of religion.

Ideas do not begin to function overnight. Only with the continuing and twisted pressure from the English crown, and only after repeated attempts of gerrymandering to sort out denominational adherents, did eighteenth-century America come to realize the importance of freedom of religion and the principle of church-state separation that underwrites it. The history of Swansea can be read as a gradual process of a private society shedding off its "sectarian" character as Weber described it to take on a public character. The separation of church and state is made possible under the mature recognition of the society's public character.