



The Rights of God's Stewards: Property, Conscience, and the Great Awakening in Canterbury, Connecticut

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IN 1743, Connecticut's established church took a pivotal step towards dissolution when a member of the First Church of Canterbury took possession of the meetinghouse's keys and locked the doors.¹ His aim was to block the stream of itinerant evangelical preachers he had come to distrust. Like any number of ornery individuals making principled stands in New England's religious history, his name has been forgotten. But his takeover of the communal building produced a fierce reaction, resulting in the formation of one of the earliest and most prominent "Separate" congregations that rejected the colony's "Standing Order" of state churches. And perhaps more importantly, he set the terms for the ensuing debate over the proper relationship between civil and ecclesiastical governments. From this point on, the campaign for religious liberty would be fought as a battle over property, always in part a contest over who owned what and what ownership meant.

There is no question of Canterbury's prominent place in New England's religious history.² Its congregation was, to quote

¹Ellen D. Larned, *History of Windham County, Connecticut*, 2 vols. (Worcester, MA: Published by the author, 1874), 1:403–4, 413–14; Solomon Paine, *A Short View of the Difference between the Church of Christ, and the Established Churches in the Colony of Connecticut* (Newport: printed by James Franklin for the author, 1752), 8–9, 17 (hereafter *A Short View of Difference*); "Obadiah Johnson to the keeper of the kees, Dec. 25, 1744." James Terry Collection, folder 2, document 21, Connecticut Historical Society, Hartford, CT.

²Canterbury's Separates play a significant role in histories of the Separate and Separate-Baptist movements, as well as general studies of the First Great Awakening.

one historian, “a mother church” for Separates across the region.³ Following the revivals of the Great Awakening, the town experienced a schism between pro-revivalist New Lights and pro-government conservatives. When the church’s New Light majority refused to submit to civil magistrates, clerical councils, and the town government, they withdrew as a body from the Standing Order. As the first church to separate, it forged an institutional model for the nearly one hundred other “Separate” churches that were gathering across Connecticut and Massachusetts.⁴ This single community went on to supply much of the Separate movement’s leadership in the 1740s and 50s: Elisha Paine carried their cause across New England as the Separates’ most effective itinerant preacher; his brother Solomon Paine remained in Canterbury, shepherding both his own church and dozens of fledging communities across eastern Connecticut; and the seminarians Ebenezer and John Cleaveland brought the controversy over New Light separations to Yale College, the intellectual heart of Connecticut’s congregationalist Standing Order. Despite this early position of

See C. C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740–1800: Strict Congregationalists and Separate Baptists in the Great Awakening* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962); William McLoughlin, *New England Dissent, 1630–1833: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971); Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Douglas L. Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land of Light: Experiencing Religious Awakenings in Eighteenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017); Christopher M. Jedrey, *The World of John Cleaveland: Family and Community in Eighteenth-Century New England* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1979); and John W. Jeffries, “The Separation in the Canterbury Congregational Church: Religion, Family, and Politics in a Connecticut Town,” *New England Quarterly* 52 (1979): 522–49.

³Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 181.

⁴Canterbury’s Separates were the first church to separate, but not the first Separate church. Canterbury’s Separates claim this title because a majority of church members voted to withdraw from the established church, giving the decision the character of an official church act. In most other cases, New Light minorities left churches controlled by less zealous majorities. They separated as individuals and formed into a church once outside the Standing Order. The first Separate church in Connecticut mostly likely emerged in New London, where a small group of dissenters withdrew in 1742 and immediately called a pastor. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England*, vii, 70–75, 86–89, 114–15.

prominence among dissenters, however, historians have typically assigned Canterbury's Separates at best a minor role in the story of religious liberty in colonial New England and early America.⁵

There is some excuse for this oversight: the church stepped back from the campaign against Connecticut's religious establishment once granted relief from ecclesiastical taxes in 1760; its leaders left no influential publications; subsequent decades of activism were increasingly led by Separates-turned-Baptists whose relationship with "Strict Congregationalists" quickly soured; and even then, Connecticut's state churches were not officially disestablished until 1818.⁶ Yet Canterbury's Separates blazed the path other dissenters followed. They also kept better records than any other community in the movement they spearheaded. Their history thus provides unique insight into the grievances and logics that ignited and sustained the largest revolt against the alliance between church and state the colony had ever witnessed.

The conflict in Canterbury reveals that the struggle for religious liberty in eighteenth-century New England had a material base. From beginning to end, the thread holding together the chapters in the town's spiritual divorce was the struggle of factions to maintain control over property.⁷ Property ultimately proved an inescapable source of conflict because of Connecticut's policy of ecclesiastical taxation. Thus, neither the opponents nor defenders of state-sponsored religion can be understood without considering the political and ecclesiastical

⁵Canterbury is not mentioned in three important histories of religious liberty in early America: Thomas J. Curry, *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1986); Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); and Chris Beneke, *Beyond Toleration: The Religious Origins of American Pluralism* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶The only publication to come from Canterbury's Separates was Solomon Paine's self-published *A Short View of Difference*.

⁷In a similar approach, J.M. Bumsted has argued that New Light separations were shaped as much by institutional issues such as meetinghouse locations and ministerial salaries as by radical evangelical pietism. "Revivalism and Separatism in New England: The First Society of Norwich, Connecticut, as a Case Study," *William and Mary Quarterly* 24 (1967): 588–612.

economies of Connecticut towns. Over time, the terms of the legal struggle shifted in dramatic ways: the New Lights' opening arguments rested on communal claims to church property that were guaranteed by state-recognized ecclesiastical institutions, and only later did they shift to defending individual estates and pressing for disestablishment. Accordingly, the arguments that the dissenters employed encompassed a complex, sometimes contradictory mix of civil rights and spiritual duties. Property rights mingled with religious liberties, and appeals to conscience appeared alongside notions of Christian stewardship. But whether viewed as a religious liberty or a property right, the Separates' demand was simple: the right to use their property to support only the church of their choosing in the amount of their choosing. As they saw it, religious liberty was as much a matter of protecting estates as protecting consciences. But whereas the Standing Order could afford to give considerable latitude to dissenting consciences, they could not release dissenting estates from ecclesiastical taxes without jeopardizing the colony's economic alliance between churches and the state. As a result, the most intractable ecclesiastical divisions in eighteenth-century Connecticut did not concern how to worship, but how to pay for it.

Church Estates: A New Town Litigates for Land and God

The laws governing Connecticut's religious establishment formally structured religious life around property. Though the details differed from town to town, residents paid for ministerial salaries and other church operations through a proportional rate calculated using the same assessments of real and personal property as other taxes.⁸ Ecclesiastical taxes were universal, compulsory, and collected by the civil government (ordinarily the town, but guaranteed by the colony in cases of negligence

⁸*Acts and Laws, of His Majesties Colony of Connecticut in New-England* (Boston: Bartholomew Green and John Allen, 1702), 98–102 (hereafter *Acts and Laws of Conn.*).

or dispute). The system thus created a direct connection between the wealth of a town's population and the resources of its church. It also meant that long before New Light factions began protesting ecclesiastical taxes, any effort to create a new church generated conflict among various interests and property holders. Before Connecticut's General Assembly would approve the creation of a new parish, applicants first had to propose boundaries within which the residents owned enough property to maintain Christian worship. Even when there were persuasive demographic or geographic reasons for carving a new parish out of an existing one, the original reliably mounted legal resistance for the simple reason that the loss of rate-paying parishioners would either leave it poorer or increase the tax burden on those who remained.⁹ Decisions about new churches often spoke in terms of the number of "estates" committed to joining the new church.¹⁰ The cost of building a meetinghouse, settling a minister, and guaranteeing his salary set a high material bar for incorporation, but these expenses were regularly outweighed by other incentives that grew increasingly powerful as population expanded away from an existing town center. Given slow travel times, New England weather, and fines for truancy, a more convenient trek to church was alluring to the pious and worldly alike. Similarly, landowners who bought cheaply on the edges of the town could expect their property values to jump when a new religious center was established nearby.¹¹

So it was in Canterbury. In 1703, a handful of relatively prosperous families living on the west side of Plainfield—including the Paines and the Cleavelands—petitioned to organize a new church and town. The General Assembly approved

⁹*The Code of 1650* (Hartford: Silas Andrus, 1830), 74–75; *Acts and Laws of Conn.*, 83–84.

¹⁰See Canterbury's 1733 letter to the Connecticut General Assembly in Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:293.

¹¹The best work on the labor, capital, and expertise necessary to found a New England town is John Frederick Martin's *Profits in the Wilderness: Entrepreneurship and the Founding of New England Towns in the Seventeenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

Canterbury's creation, but a dispute arose within a year over the town's inability to collect enough tax revenue to recruit a minister and build a meetinghouse.¹² Two of the most difficult issues facing Canterbury's proprietors lay in the imprecise and contentious art of drawing town borders. One of these was built into the terms of the town's original separation: Plainfield (incorporated in 1699) refused to relinquish some of the land, inhabitants, and taxable estates that the departing residents requested. Canterbury's founders rejected the boundary lines asserted by Plainfield, creating the conditions for an acrimonious land dispute that Connecticut's assembly proved unable to resolve quickly. Over the course of the next decades, representatives from almost every notable family in Canterbury's founding generation were either sued or fined for stealing resources, tearing down fences, or having "laid violent hands" on their Plainfield adversaries.¹³

At the same time, Canterbury also found itself feuding with the town of Windham over land on its western front. The disagreement arose from competing claims to a strip of land that rival English proprietors had acquired from competing Mohegan sachems: the sons of Uncas, Owaneco and Joshua, and Joshua's son Abimileck.¹⁴ Colonial English settlers consistently exploited Native conflicts to extend their land holdings, but as a consequence they also frequently purchased positions in long-standing disputes.¹⁵ Thus, Indigenous conflicts persisted

¹²"Att a Genrll Assembly Holden att Newhaven October 14th, 1703," *The Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut 1636-1776*, ed. J. Hammond Trumbull and Charles J. Hoadly (Hartford: Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1850-1890), 4:445.

¹³"Plainfield's Appeal to the General Court," in Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:134-35. On Canterbury's founding, see 1:133-59.

¹⁴Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:88-89, 146-48, 294-96.

¹⁵Although in English legal theory New England's land was the king's to grant, in practice it was important to translate Native property into English deeds via legal purchase. This not only gave the acquisition the color of law, but it generated the documentation necessary to defend ownership rights in litigation. Even when English law recognized Indigenous property, it was structured to the advantage of English proprietors and easily manipulated for further gain. To both Native Americans and historians, such legal transactions have appeared as "naked appropriation." Allan Greer, *Property and Dispossession: Natives, Empires, and Land in Early Modern North America* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 237, 377-79.

as conflicts between colonial towns. Canterbury's principal proprietor, the "land pirate" James Fitch Jr., was willing to pay for inevitable lawsuits because the land cost him little else: Fitch kept the details murky, but it appears he paid a small amount for a deed from Owaneco, agreeing to hold it in trust, but subsequently sold the land without the Mohegans' consent or offering compensation.¹⁶

Besides these border disputes, there were also tensions within Canterbury. As in most frontier towns, enterprising proprietors like Fitch and other "promoters" backed the town politically and economically in exchange for much of its most fertile land. Yet they were typically investors, not settlers. These non-resident landholders understood that their lots would increase in value as the town grew and, since colonial law made it difficult to tax unimproved land, they had little incentive to sell during Canterbury's early decades. Even if they made their homes in Canterbury, as Fitch did, they possessed more land than they could use. Thus, at a time when it was economically crucial for Canterbury to increase its revenue by attracting settlers and growing its population, large tracts of desirable land lay unoccupied and tax-sheltered.¹⁷ Desperate to expand, Canterbury found itself hemmed in on all sides and hamstrung within its own borders.

Because Connecticut law tied the fate of the church to the town's tax base, these economic disputes had explicit spiritual dimensions. The town's overtaxed residents filed multiple petitions and complaints to the General Assembly in its first three years requesting more territory and greater freedom to tax properties within it. Each time, their appeal hinged upon their inability to establish religion under the current circumstances. First, the town's representatives asked permission to tax unimproved land, "as hath been the reasonable custom in new places, until our meeting-house and ministerial house be

¹⁶Wendy B. St. Jean, "Inventing Guardianship: The Mohegan Indians and Their Protectors," *NEQ* 72 (1999): 382–84; Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 84–88.

¹⁷Martin, *Profits in the Wilderness*, 56–58; Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:144.

built.”¹⁸ This request was granted in 1705, but one to extend the border northward got lost in Hartford and was never answered. Accordingly, Canterbury's selectmen reiterated their religious argument for additional land in 1706:

our timber we have got for a meeting house is likely to lie and rot—the people will do nothing more about it because of our straightness; no minister dare venture to settle amongst us unless we be enlarged; our inhabitants that love religion are drawing off and our lands are like to fall in such men's hands as care not for the gospel—so that ere long there will not be so much as the name of religion in this place.¹⁹

The colonial government, however, doubted that Canterbury was hemorrhaging saints and repelling pastors. It declined to grant additional land, instead offering an exemption from the county tax rate in 1708 until the meetinghouse was constructed. In response, the town turned to a more successful strategy: prosecuting its claims in land disputes with neighbors. Finally, in June of 1711, Canterbury successfully gathered a new church in Connecticut's Standing Order, offering the Reverend Samuel Estabrook a settlement, salary, and newly built meetinghouse.²⁰

The point is not that Canterbury's residents used religious concerns to mask their acquisitiveness. In fact, the opposite conclusion is equally persuasive. Increasing the town's jurisdiction divided the cost of religion into more affordable shares and thereby provided a more sustainable economic foundation for the town's spiritual life. Spiritual and material interests aligned, and the evidence suggests that Canterburians cared deeply about both. Immediately after receiving approval to organize a new town, its prospective inhabitants went to work organizing regular worship. They acquired suitable land, built a meetinghouse and parsonage, and then labored to convince a minister that they could compensate him enough to make a frontier ministry worthwhile. Connecticut's ecclesiastical order

¹⁸“Canterbury's Appeal to the General Assembly,” quoted in Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:145.

¹⁹“Canterbury's Appeal to the General Assembly,” quoted in Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:146.

²⁰Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:143–48.

was structured such that the most effective tactic to accomplish these religious aims was to extend the town's territory, increasing the population and thus the number of taxable estates. As a result, everyone in Canterbury accepted that the spiritual health of their community depended upon taxation, land acquisition, economic growth, and, when necessary, even lawsuits.²¹ Like other Connecticut congregationalists, they believed that the church's wellbeing could not be measured without assessing the town's property, and that questions regarding the town's property could not be resolved without tabulating the church's interests.

The Church Loses the Meetinghouse: Majorities' Rights in a Constitutional Crisis

As litigious as Canterbury's first decades were, the town and church prospered together in a system that coordinated the worldly aims of the town and the spiritual aims of the church.²² In this regard, Canterbury exemplified the hope expressed in Connecticut's seventeenth-century civil and ecclesiastical constitutions: that church and state "may both stand together & flourish the one being helpful unto the other, in their distinct & due administrations."²³ In this puritan commonwealth, magistrates promised to "meintene and preserve the libberty and purity of the Gospell," and the clergy gladly accepted their assistance policing attendance at public worship, suppressing heterodoxy, and collecting money.²⁴ Such harmonious action was possible because civil and religious governments shared the stated aim of obedience to God. In practice, this union was

²¹For scholarship showing that economic progress was as much an asset as a threat to puritan religion, see Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Commerce and Culture: The Maritime Communities of Colonial Massachusetts, 1690–1750* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1984); Mark A. Peterson, *The Price of Redemption: The Spiritual Economy of Puritan New England* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997); Mark R. Valeri, *Heavenly Merchandize: How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

²²Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:158.

²³"The Cambridge Platform" in *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, ed. Williston Walker (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893), 235 (XVII.2).

²⁴"Constitution of 1638," in *Conn. Code of 1650*, 11–12.

most fully realized at the town level, where civil institutions typically observed the same geographical boundaries as the fiercely localistic congregational churches.²⁵ One town, one church was the New England ideal.

Puritans conceived of both church and state as political institutions. God ordained each for the purpose of human government, and colonial New Englanders conceptualized them using the language of sovereignty, law, rights, and consent. The domains and tools of the two governments, however, differed: civil government ruled over a person's outward behavior and wielded the coercive power of the sword, whereas ecclesiastical government took charge over the soul, with most of its disciplinary power ultimately resting on the threat of excommunication. While both employed democratic procedures, they also differed in how they regulated their voting memberships. In the town, a modest property qualification limited the franchise, though most men either born within its borders or approved by a majority of inhabitants could vote. In the church, strict spiritual qualifications limited the franchise to male communicants whose reception of divine grace was recognized by a majority of existing male members.²⁶ This distinction did not, however, mean that only church members voted in church affairs. The civil and religious governments were too interdependent to allow for that kind of autonomy, and thus Connecticut employed an intermediary institution: the parish, or "ecclesiastical society." Counterintuitively, the ecclesiastical society was part of the civil government, belonging to the town rather than the church. It recognized the local church's spiritual authority but granted all of the town's enfranchised householders a concurring vote regarding the church's largest financial

²⁵Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 17.

²⁶On property qualifications in civil politics (a personal estate of £40 or a freehold estate of 40s. per annum in some cases, and 50s. in others), see *Acts and Laws of Conn.*, 40, 111–12; Bruce C. Daniels, *The Connecticut Town: Growth and Development, 1635–1790* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), 64–93. On "democracy" and spiritual qualifications in congregationalist churches, see "The Cambridge Platform," 214–17 (IIX–IX); James F. Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999), 4–6.

expenditures, particularly matters concerning the minister and the meetinghouse. The law compelled all property-owners to maintain the church financially, so it was only fair that they have a say in how the church spent those funds. Separates came to resent this property qualification for voting in the society, not because it barred the poor from participation but rather because it allowed unregenerate, non-members a say in church affairs despite having “no Qualification but *Mammon*.”²⁷ For Canterbury’s first thirty-odd years, however, a mix of consensus, deference, and overlapping membership enabled the town’s ecclesiastical society and church to work together. Then in the 1740s, the two electorates began voting in opposite directions, sparking a constitutional crisis over authority and property in the church.

A religious revival drove the wedge between town and church. Charismatic itinerants from across the British Empire passed through Connecticut’s eastern frontier, and because of these preachers’ association with urban publicists and the famous George Whitefield, Canterbury’s experience was absorbed into a transatlantic “Great Awakening.”²⁸ When the Rev. Eleazar Wheelock reached Windham County from neighboring Lebanon in October of 1741, he found the Canterburians in his audience particularly impressionable. They had been without a minister since earlier that year when they had dismissed their pastor after a woman had accused him of impropriety. This vacancy left the church disorganized, eager for direction, and primed for revival.²⁹ Wheelock’s call to repent and take responsibility for their condition struck a nerve with the townspeople. By January 1742, the church members had confessed that they had “ben falty in our Discipline worship & manners” and collectively renewed their covenant.³⁰ Without a minister

²⁷On ecclesiastical societies, see Daniels, *The Connecticut Town*, 94–118; Paine, *A Short View of Difference*, 8.

²⁸Frank Lambert, *Inventing the “Great Awakening”* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

²⁹Larned, *History of Windham County, Connecticut*, 1:297, 396–99.

³⁰*Records of the Congregational Church in Canterbury, Connecticut, 1711–1844* (Hartford, CT: Press of Finlay Brothers, 1932), 13.

at the helm, awakened laypeople stepped up to pray and exhort at daily meetings, driving the town's sense of spiritual distress to a fever pitch and leading many to the release of conversion. Life-long Christians experienced being "born again" in Christ. They scorned their former "godly walking" as formalism and hypocrisy, determining that it had not been the work of the Holy Spirit but their own unregenerate powers.³¹ In the retrospective summary of Ezra Stiles, a future minister in the Standing Order and president of Yale, Canterbury "became new lighted."³²

Initially, most in the town welcomed the increasing membership and fervor, but the seeds of a bitter conflict were planted when these converts turned their newfound spiritual vision towards less zealous neighbors. Where they once had seen blameless Christians, they now saw "Corrupt Members" who had crept into what ought to be a pure church.³³ The town's empty pulpit prompted the first step towards a schism between these awakened "New Lights" and their neighbors. Witnessing the Holy Spirit's work in New England quickly but radically transformed the way New Lights judged who were and were not qualified to preach and pastor. The most famous local lay exhorter was Elisha Paine, who rapidly progressed from speaking in homes to preaching in Canterbury's church and then to intenerating across New England. Paine was an extraordinary example of a general phenomenon: lay exhorters—men and women; Indigenous, African, and European—who boasted no credentials but their own experience of the gospel.³⁴ But not

³¹Winiarski, *Darkness Falls on the Land*, esp. 115–30, 147–54, 187–91.

³²Ezra Stiles, *Extracts from the Itineraries and Other Miscellanies of Ezra Stiles, D.D., LL.D., 1755–1794*, ed. Franklin Bowditch Dexter (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1916), 297.

³³*Recs. of the Canterbury Cong. Ch.*, 13–14.

³⁴Paine confirmed the fears of an unlearned ministry when he appeared to reject trinitarian doctrine, preferring to see the Father, Son, and Spirit as offices occupied by the same God. Sensible to Paine, his view was heretical, and he quickly backtracked. *A Letter from the Associated Ministers of the County of Windham* (Boston: J. Draper, 1745), 13–15. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England*, 115–23. See also Catherine A. Brekus, *Strangers & Pilgrims: Female Preaching in America, 1740–1845* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 23–67; Linford D. Fisher, *The*

everyone in the clergy-less congregation was content to have the vacuum filled by homegrown exhorters. Connecticut's General Assembly shared this discomfort: in May of 1742, it passed "An Act for regulating Abuses and correcting Disorders in Ecclesiastical Affairs." The new law prohibited all preaching not sanctioned by the local standing minister, and it singled out unordained preachers for a fine and imprisonment at the court's discretion.³⁵

The act generated more disorder than it suppressed. It compelled moderate friends of the revival to support the government's use of force in restraining effective preachers or condone civil disobedience. Canterbury's civil leaders had previously tolerated some religious excesses, but now the families with the most political power organized a pro-government faction to stop illegal preaching in the church.³⁶ But when these "Old Lights" finally persuaded a reluctant constable to discipline Paine, the unlucky law enforcement officer was boisterously rebuffed by the town's many New Lights.³⁷ The pro-government faction found temporary relief when Paine was arrested in Massachusetts for preaching without a license. A lawyer by profession, Paine spent the next few months behind bars because he refused to pay the bond for an unjust warrant enforcing an unrighteous law. His confinement did little to quiet the situation in Canterbury: not only did other exhorters and itinerants take turns in the church's pulpit, but Paine himself continued to preach from prison, attracting considerable attention from across the region.³⁸ Old Lights lost patience, New Lights grew militant, and together they pushed Canterbury into the center of New England's simmering religious controversy.

Indian Great Awakening: Religion and the Shaping of Native Cultures in Early America (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2012), 65–83; and Erik R. Seeman, "Justise Must Take Plase': Three African Americans Speak of Religion in Eighteenth-Century New England," *WMQ* 56 (1999): 393–414.

³⁵See "An Act for regulating Abuses and correcting Disorders in Ecclesiastical Affairs," *Public Records of Conn.* 1636–1776, 8:454–57.

³⁶On identifying this party as "pro-government" rather than "anti-revival," see Jeffries, "The Separation in the Canterbury Congregational Church," 538–47.

³⁷*Boston Gazette*, December 16, 1742.

³⁸Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:400–2.

The church and society spent much of 1743 vetoing one another's candidates for the empty pulpit. In the midst of this pastoral search, the unnamed "keeper of the keys" transformed the debate over leadership into one over property. The individual entrusted with the meetinghouse's keys was a church member but part of the pro-government party in control of the society. He no doubt knew that the society represented a majority of townspeople and that their choice of minister would be backed by the local government and the region's clergy. He also likely recognized the superior strategic position of his New Light opponents: not only did they have a majority in the church, but they relished the artless exhortations of lay preachers and were in no rush to fill the pastorate. And so, grasping the power of obstructionism, the keeper of the keys declined to open the building for illegal exhorters and disruptive itinerants.³⁹ Although a stand for decorum, spiritual order, and the rule of law, this tactical inaction was as much about conscience as Elisha Paine's determined preaching or any future dissenting protest. Indeed, the keeper of the keys qualified as a kind of dissenter, rebelling against the church majority's authority. Without keys to the meetinghouse, the New Lights were shut out. Short of breaking down the door, they could only enter when the keeper opened the doors for an authorized preacher. On one level, this hardly constituted a setback: the Awakening had opened a new geography of preaching, preparing New Lights to worship inside homes and outside in fields.⁴⁰ But as creative, flexible, and spontaneous as the evangelical movement could be, Canterbury's church majority would not patiently bear being robbed of their building.

The opponents deadlocked for months. Goodwill exhausted, the pro-government faction set upon a course that broke the impasse in its favor but also guaranteed schism. Led by Colonel

³⁹Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:403–4, 413–14; Solomon Paine, *A Short View of Difference*, 8–9, 17; "Obadiah Johnson to the keeper of the kees, Dec. 25, 1744."

⁴⁰Timothy D. Hall, *Contested Boundaries: Itinerancy and the Reshaping of the Colonial American Religious World* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

John Dyer, the town's ecclesiastical society appealed to the Saybrook Platform—the ecclesiastical constitution adopted by the Connecticut's General Assembly in 1708—and called Windham County's ministerial consociation to intervene in December of 1743.⁴¹ This seemed a sound strategy, as the Standing Order had closed ranks to contain the spreading religious upheaval, but it came at the cost of claims to integrity. Canterbury's church had never adopted the Saybrook Platform, in part because the town was settled by Massachusetts families who had worried that Connecticut deviated from the principles of pure congregationalism when it empowered ministerial consociations to oversee local congregations.⁴² Indeed, earlier that year, the church, including Dyer, had unanimously voted to continue using the older Cambridge Platform, the constitution that had governed Connecticut's established churches for most of the seventeenth century.⁴³ In that moment of consensus, Canterbury's residents had agreed that they preferred the older platform because it protected the local congregation's autonomy from consociations and civil authorities, whereas Saybrook essentially imposed presbyterianism. As committed as ever to congregational self-governance, the New Lights boycotted the consociation's proceedings. The gathered ministers unsurprisingly sided with the society majority (which recognized their authority) rather than the New Light church majority (which did not) and recommended that the society proceed in

⁴¹"The Saybrook Meeting and Articles," in Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism*, 502–6.

⁴²Jedrey, *The World of John Cleaveland*, 11–12.

⁴³James Cooper argues that the Saybrook Platform transformed separations into a conflict over ministerial authority, and that without this platform to challenge, Massachusetts' Separates rarely raised the question of the relative authority of the clergy and the laity. The paradigm of clergy versus laity, however, can be misleading. In Canterbury, the original conflict was between two competing lay groups, a majority in the church and another in the town. To the extent that the question of ministerial authority was raised, it was primarily one of ministerial councils rather than the local cleric. Separates rejected Cogswell's authority not because of any general commitment to limiting clerical authority but because they regarded his election and ordination as illegitimate. "Enthusiasts or Democrats? Separatism, Church Government, and the Great Awakening in Massachusetts," *NEQ* 65 (1992): 265–83.

nominating James Cogswell for the pastorate, with or without the church's concurrence.⁴⁴

Since the Cambridge Platform gave the power of electing a minister to the church and denied ministerial councils power to intervene, the consociation's decision hinged upon delegitimizing the church's earlier vote to adopt this platform as their constitution. To accomplish this, the ministers put forth a strikingly secular argument: "it would have been *an infringement on ye natural rights and liberties of mankind* for any number of [the members of the church], without the consent of the rest, to hold them to any constitution they were not before under and did not consent to."⁴⁵ The anti-Saybrook church majority certainly felt the bitter irony of this conclusion. Simply by ruling in the conflict, the consociation was holding them not only to a constitution to which they did not consent but had officially rejected. A second, more significant irony would emerge in time: Connecticut's established church was pushing Canterbury's New Lights into outright dissent using the language of consent and natural rights, unaware that the dissenters would use this language over the next seventy-five years to pare back the established church's power.

There was briefly reason to hope that the recommended Cogswell would shepherd the congregation to peace, but his arrival transformed the informal New Light and pro-government parties into disciplined voting blocs that split both town and church polities. The New Light majority convened their own group of pro-revivalist ministers to advise—though not decide—their case, and like the consociation, they also recommended Cogswell. This gained the recent Yale graduate a probationary hearing but little more. Concerned that unconverted ministers had infiltrated the Standing Order, the New Lights applied a critical ear to his sermons and made no effort to temper their dissatisfaction. Elisha Paine dressed down the aspiring preacher: "I had rather been burnt at the Stake than to have heard such a Sermon," he bluntly concluded,

⁴⁴Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:402–11.

⁴⁵Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:409.

objecting that Cogswell minimized the power of the Holy Spirit and soft-pedaled the puritan doctrines of election and limited atonement.⁴⁶ Paine's uncharitable posture embarrassed some allies, and his enthusiasm for removing pollution within their congregation—one lukewarm neighbor at a time—was by no means shared by all. But the New Lights trusted that the Spirit enabled them to discern the godly from “mere professors,” and Cogswell displayed the symptoms of formalism. When the church voted on whether to call him to be their pastor, the New Lights flexed their political power: thirty-one church members opposed him, while only twenty-three supported him.⁴⁷

The vote only confirmed that the partnership between civil and ecclesiastical governments had collapsed. With the Windham consociation's blessing, Canterbury's ecclesiastical society moved to install their candidate over the church majority's objections. It also barred the meetinghouse to other preachers and even began arresting unauthorized exhorters, including the recidivist Paine. Cogswell received his call in the fall of 1744 and was soon ordained as the pastor of the First Church of Canterbury.⁴⁸

⁴⁶A *Letter from the Associated Ministers of the County of Windham*, 7–8.

⁴⁷Sixteen male members of the church joined the pro-establishment body, seven fewer than the twenty-three who had voted for Cogswell in results sent to the General Assembly. Although thirty-one male members voted against Cogswell, the New Light church began with fifty-seven covenanters in 1745 and had sixty-two men and eighty-one women by the fall of 1746. The relatively small number of members remaining in the Standing Order suggests that some who voted for Cogswell joined the New Lights, perhaps believing that the majority's rejection of Cogswell was legitimate. Furthermore, assuming everyone who subscribed to the New Lights' covenant were members, the congregation appears to have claimed a majority of the preexisting church and attracted new members. This suggests that despite Separates' stricter admission standards, divisions sometimes expanded total church membership. While the Separates complained about “unconverted” church members, they remained revivalists, equally concerned with increasing membership as purifying it. For the earlier vote on Cogswell, see “At a Meeting of the Brethren of the First Church of Christ in Canterbury, November 27, 1944” and “The Names of those that were in full Communion with the First Church of Christ in Canterbury,” Connecticut Archives Ecclesiastical Affairs, First Series, vol. 10, nos. 5, 12, Connecticut State Library, Hartford, CT. On the 143 New Lights, see *Recs. of the Canterbury Cong. Ch.*, 11–12, 20–22. Also see Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:409–17, 437–38, 443; Jeffries, “The Separation in the Canterbury Congregational Church,” 536.

⁴⁸Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:413–17, 422–27.

The Properties of a True Church

Dispossessed of the building and their power usurped, the New Lights opted to worship separately rather than concede. Their new position, however, required a change of strategy. Having failed to win their case within the established religious structure, Canterbury's Separates appealed to civil government. The church majority submitted their first petition to the General Assembly in April of 1745 and claimed they had been unjustly deprived of two rights: to choose the minister and use the meetinghouse. They repeated the argument that both belonged to the church, not the town, and thus ought to be governed by majority votes of church members.⁴⁹ As they had told Canterbury's society, Cogswell's installation and the building's seizure were "unscriptural, illegal and unprecedented."⁵⁰

The New Light majority understood that they would not be restored as the town's established church. Accordingly, their petition dropped the claims to control the church and instead requested that the civil authorities guarantee their communal property in the divorce. The memorialists claimed that because Cogswell's ordination was illegitimate, they could not in conscience join his congregation or submit to him as pastor and thus had no duty to contribute towards his settlement and maintenance. They asked for relief from both the special collection of £68 for his ordination and the annual rate levied to cover his salary and the expenses of his church.⁵¹ They had no idea that the Separate movement's trajectory would be defined for decades by the struggle to liberate themselves from ecclesiastical taxes or how sophisticated their legal, political, and theological arguments would become. The petitioners spent more time on a second request: compensation for the loss of their meetinghouse. Alluding to the keeper of the keys, they claimed that the building had been "by force taken from [the church] Contrary to Right by shutting of it against them." Given the

⁴⁹To the Honorable General Assembly to be held att Hartford May 9th, 1745." Conn. Archives, Eccles., 10:13.

⁵⁰Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:423.

⁵¹"To the Honorable General Assembly, May 9th, 1745."

Assembly's commitment to "justice" in all "civil concerns," they concluded that if the meetinghouse was not returned, then the colonial government should compel the town to compensate them for an "equitable part" of the building's worth.⁵² In the petitioners' view, their past contributions to the building entitled them to a stake in it, and since their constitutional right to use it was denied, they should be allowed to reclaim their equity. In sum, they asked to be bought out.

The assembly refused both requests without comment.⁵³ Despite this initial defeat, however, Canterbury's Separates had selected both a venue and a strategy for their unfolding struggle against the Standing Order. They would make their case in civil courts and construct it around lost property. Though the argument remained unelaborated, its thesis was set: the economic structure of the established church deprived citizens of the usages and possessions that civil law ought to protect.

Although the Canterbury Separates lost the meetinghouse, they did not walk away empty handed. Rather, they took two deeply meaningful objects with them: the church record book and the communion ware. Just as the meetinghouse keys were communal property entrusted to a single individual, the same was true of these pieces belonging to the church. But unlike the keys, the keepers of these items were New Lights. On November 17, 1744, at the first meeting of Canterbury's "Standing" church after the New Lights' departure, the brethren voted to send two members to recover the church's "Book of Records." Having chosen a moderator and voted to call Cogswell, they needed the record book to complete the process of restoration.⁵⁴ The book defined Canterbury's spiritual community and bound it together across time. It gave the names of the women and men who had affirmed the church's covenant and

⁵²"To the Honorable General Assembly, May 9th, 1745." The New Lights first made this proposal directly to the society, who apparently ignored their offer. Lamed, *History of Windham County*, 1:417.

⁵³"Upon ye Prayer of Backus, Pain, Cleveland, and Bradford," Conn. Archives, Eccles., 10:14.

⁵⁴"At a Meeting of the Brethren of the First Church of Christ in Canterbury, November 27, 1744."

confession and been admitted to membership. Furthermore, it told the history of the church, its members, and the souls entrusted to its care. Entries recorded pastors, votes, gifts, and disciplinary actions. Ever expanding lists added births, baptisms, marriages, new communicants, and deaths. Yet this symbol of identity and memory was in the possession of Obadiah Johnson, a New Light, and he refused to surrender it. The Separates viewed themselves as the true First Church of Canterbury, from which a minority had seceded, and their possession of the book vindicated their identity.⁵⁵ Indeed, for the historian trying to understand Canterbury's schism, the book's most significant contribution is how little about this crucial moment it recorded: it manifested continuity, with only a "covenant renewal" in 1746 signifying that something had been broken and required repair.⁵⁶ Having reconstituted the congregation with this ritual, the smaller but purportedly purer church refused to cede ownership of the book or the title of First Church of Canterbury. With the record book in their possession, the New Lights believed that they had lost the meeting house but kept the church.

The story of Canterbury's communion ware mirrors that of the record book. Purchased in 1716 with a gift from the congregational church in Barnstable, Massachusetts, the sacramental cups and plates were the collective property of the church and entrusted to the care of Deacon Timothy Backus, another New Light. As with the record book, the established church demanded the return of the communion ware in 1746, but New Lights replied that Canterbury's true church remained its rightful keeper. At this juncture, the situations of the record book and communion ware diverged sharply. Following the conflicts over who owned the meetinghouse and the record book, the New Lights changed course and suggested a compromise: they would relinquish half of the cups and plates. Writing to the recently installed Cogswell (to whom they still referred as Mister, not Reverend, and certainly not Brother), Solomon Paine shared their intricate reasoning. He indicted the opposing

⁵⁵"To the Honorable General Assembly, May 9th, 1745."

⁵⁶*Recs. of the Canterbury Cong. Ch.*, 13–15.

congregation for breaking the church covenant, arguing that in doing so they voided their “civil right” to the vessels. Yet, surprisingly, he defined his church’s right as a “temporal,” not “spiritual,” interest. In his view, the sacramental vessels were like any other ordinary goods. This did not, however, mean that they were matters of religious indifference or that the New Lights could dispose of them as they pleased. Rather, “providence” had made the New Lights “stewards” and charged them with using the items according to the “direction & command of God.” Thus, they could afford to share the cups and plates because God willed it, though with the caveat that they were offered to Cogswell’s party not “as a church,” but as a “civil” entity.⁵⁷ The liberty to forsake a civil right and temporal interest in the communion ware stands in contrast to the spiritual interest that the New Light congregation could not transfer: their claim to be the true Church of Christ in Canterbury. While it may seem characteristically Protestant that this claim was not tied to ritual objects, the evangelical dissenters’ identity was tied to the record book, another equally material object. There was, thus, a clear hierarchy defining the relationship between spiritual and temporal goods, though both were situated in a theology of stewardship that determined when divine gifts should be held, used, or relinquished.

Yet lest we misunderstand the value of temporal goods to the New Lights, there was an explicitly political dimension to their generosity with the communion ware: they hoped their magnanimous act might provoke “gospel repentance” in the established church for “persecuting & oppressing the poor saints of God.” Referring to the meetinghouse and ministerial rates, Paine accused everyone who joined with the ecclesiastical society of “partaking” in “ill gotten goods,” chastising them for “covetousness” and warning of spiritual and temporal judgements.⁵⁸ The New Lights’ offer to split the communion ware—framed in terms more incendiary than diplomatic—was thus a symbolic act highlighting the material abuses they suffered. Their

⁵⁷“The Congregational Church of Christ in Canterbury to Mr James Cogswell,” Terry Coll., folder 4, doc. 33.

⁵⁸“Cong. Ch. of Christ in Canterbury to Cogswell.”

willingness to relinquish their civil right to the table vessels did not signal an indifference to temporal goods but rather constituted a strategy to secure them. They hoped that sharing the vessels would advance their ultimate aim of liberating their estates from the yoke of ecclesiastical taxes.

Canterbury's keeper of the keys was pivotal to the religious history of Connecticut because he forced the New Lights to make their initial stand on a right to property and introduced a dimension into the struggle between dissenters and the establishment that grew in importance. Given that Connecticut law bound the health of churches to the prosperity of their towns, it was impossible that any challenge to the ecclesiastical order would not also impinge upon economic matters. In this sense, the keeper of the keys simply obliged in fulfilling an inevitable outcome. Yet because he forced the question of property at such an early moment, both the New Lights and the pro-government party were compelled to take positions almost exactly opposite to those upon which they would settle. Before it became a battle between dissenters and the established church, the conflict over state-sponsored religion pitted church against town. The parties fought in overlapping democratic polities, appealing to rival, state-recognized ecclesiastical constitutions. The New Light church majority initially claimed communal rights, believing themselves to be Canterbury's legal church and thus entitled to the civil government's help in upholding its claims. By contrast, their opponents in the town majority introduced the language of individual rights and consent in defense of a more centralized state church. These ironies indicate that aside from the unifying thread of property, almost nothing about the trajectory of religious liberty in colonial New England was predetermined from the outset.

Oppressed not Persecuted: Separate Petitions for Tax Relief

Their claim to being the true First Church of Canterbury notwithstanding, the New Lights were now officially "Separates": the first church majority to join the growing number

of New Light congregationalist churches in Connecticut and Massachusetts operating outside of the ecclesiastical establishments. As dissenting congregationalists, they passed a legal and religious frontier. The General Assembly denied Separates any rights within the established order, as well as those rights extended to most dissenters. Connecticut had taken its first steps toward toleration in 1708 by permitting “sober” Protestants to worship freely outside the state churches, while simultaneously moving to consolidate power within the establishment by adopting the Saybrook Platform.⁵⁹ Then, in the 1720s, the colony allowed Anglicans, Quakers, and Baptists to petition either for exemption from ecclesiastical taxes or their redirection towards their own churches.⁶⁰ None of these laws helped Separates, however, because Connecticut’s magistrates could not see how congregationalists could be legitimate dissenters from a congregationalist establishment.⁶¹ As such, these “Strict Congregationalist” schismatics were implicitly excluded from the toleration acts and explicitly subject to regulation by the Standing Order.⁶² To have their congregational identity leveraged against them was a bitter pill to swallow for Canterbury’s church majority given that their complaint hinged upon the claim that the Saybrook Platform violated congregational polity and introduced presbyterianism. Adding to the Separates’ vexation, Canterbury’s ecclesiastical society taunted the conscientious objectors with a vote to release them from paying for Cogswell as soon as the Assembly recognized them as a distinct society, knowing that neither the Separates nor the government

⁵⁹“At a General Assembly and Court of Election Holden at Hartford, May the 18th, 1708,” *Pub. Recs. of Conn. 1636–1776*, 5:50–52. On legal recognition for dissenters in eighteenth-century Connecticut, see McLoughlin, *New England Dissent*, 1:247–77.

⁶⁰“At a General Assembly Holden at Harford in His Majesties Colony of Connecticut in New England on May 11th, 1727,” “An Act in Addition to and for the Alteration of an Act made in the seventh Year of the Reign of Queen Ann, entitled An Act for the Ease of Such as soberly dissent from the Way of Worship and Ministry estblisht by the Laws of the Government,” and “At a General Assembly Holden at New Haven on October 9th, 1729,” *Pub. Recs. of Conn. 1636–1776*, 7:106–7, 237–38, 257.

⁶¹The Standing Order preferred to view Separates as errant members rather than a distinct denomination. See *The Result of a Council of the Consociated Churches of the County of Windham* (Boston: Printed by J. Draper for J. Eliot, 1747), 4.

⁶²Paine, *A Short View of Difference*, 36.

wanted the dissenting church absorbed into the established order.⁶³

As in Canterbury's first decades, it remained in the economic interests of both the inhabitants and the established church to maximize the number of taxable estates. It also remained the case that the battle over who could tax which estates was fought through a series of petitions to the General Assembly. And as in previous stages of Canterbury's history, these documents reveal a messy mixture of principled objections, practical considerations, and personal grievances. But the Separates' petitions also record the way that the dissenters' effort to liberate themselves from ecclesiastical taxes fueled a period of desperate, productive experimentation with legal, political, and theological arguments regarding property.⁶⁴

Cogswell's supporters first levied a tax to fund his prospective settlement in the fall of 1744, prompting the overpowered New Lights to protest: "if you take the advantage of the Law to settle him over us and take our estates to maintain him, you will *lord it* not only over the estates but the consciences of God's heritage."⁶⁵ They resented their political impotence and the way their neighbors wielded the law to plunder them, but they did not yet reject ecclesiastical taxes in principle nor did they assert any general right to liberty of conscience.⁶⁶ Rather, supporting Cogswell violated their consciences in two specific ways: first, as New Lights, they argued that they could neither give their money nor their attention to ministers who "lacked the essential qualifications," notably an experience of new birth in Christ;

⁶³"At a Society Meeting of the first Society, December 16, 1744." Conn. Archives, Eccles., 10:6; Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:425–26.

⁶⁴Although the Canterbury Separates proceeded without any historical templates, they were not the first to attack ecclesiastical taxes for violating conscience and property. Quakers developed similar lines of argument in the seventeenth century. See J. William Frost, *A Perfect Freedom: Religious Liberty in Pennsylvania* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 12.

⁶⁵Quoted in Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:416.

⁶⁶As David Hall argues, when dealing with the puritan tradition's frequent invocations of liberty, it is essential not to import liberal notions of political freedom. *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012), xvi.

and second, as congregationalists, they could not recognize the authority of a minister who was being installed “in contradistinction from, and in opposition to, the power and privilege” of the church’s majority vote.⁶⁷

The Separates’ insistence that the Church in Canterbury had been “a Congregational Church according to the Cambridge Platform” was crucial. While the Cambridge Platform forbade either the town’s civil government or any consociation from installing a minister without a “voluntary & free election by the Church,” it also gave the civil government authority to tax citizens for the support of the church: when “Congregations are defective in their contributions . . . the Magistrate is to see ministry be duely provided for.”⁶⁸ Thus, so long as the New Lights’ appeal hinged upon the rights and privileges guaranteed by the Cambridge Platform, they could only object to ecclesiastical taxes collected to maintain ministers who had been improperly elected. This identification of the rights of conscience with the privileges of congregationalists is an important reminder that early modern dissenters did not immediately or inevitably demand a legal separation of church and state.⁶⁹ Connecticut law assigned the civil government a crucial role in governing religious matters, and Canterbury’s New Lights belonged to this system as much as their opponents. Accordingly, even in their estrangement from the Standing Order, they initially demanded that the colony uphold its original ecclesiastical constitution, the Cambridge Platform. They did not, however, linger on this position.

The Separates’ first step towards ecclesiastical voluntarism was to put their own house in order. Compelled by circumstance and aided by biblicist logic, the church made two critical institutional changes within a year of independence. First, in August of 1745, its members amended their constitution to repudiate those articles in the Cambridge Platform endorsing civil support of religion. The platform vindicated their original

⁶⁷Quoted in Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:416.

⁶⁸“The Cambridge Platform,” 215 (IX.2), 221 (XI.4).

⁶⁹Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 19–20.

claims to autonomy, but with those battles lost and the conflict's center of gravity shifting to questions of ecclesiastical taxation, it became as much a liability as an asset. Justifying their edits, the Separates added the convenient scriptural observation that they did not believe that "the Civil Power . . . are betruſted with the ſupport" of the goſpel.⁷⁰

A ſecond change was perhaps more important to the ſucceſs of voluntary religion: the Separates implemented a ſyſtem for collecting freewill offerings. In November of 1746, they voted for quarterly collections, and the next ſpring divided them further into eight installments ſo as not to overburden the congregation. Four were for "ſupport of our Paſtor" and four for "ſupport of the poor."⁷¹ Puritans had always preferred that worſhip and charity be maintained without coercion. Indeed, churches in both Maſſachuſetts and Connecticut initially organized themſelves on a voluntary economic baſis. Yet religion was too important to allow churches to languish when money grew tight or congregants grew ſtincy, and within decades the norm ſwitched from voluntary offerings obliged by the eccleſiaſtical government to compulſory taxes enforced by the civil government.⁷² Canterbury's Separates, however, deſigned their ſyſtem to ſet a ſustainable rhythm that balanced the church's need and the congregation's ability, hoping to ſucceed where New England's founding generations had failed.

Together, theſe conſtitutional amendments and practical innovations ſtruck at the eſtabliſhment's economic baſe. By the 1740s, tax ſupport was the key privilege diſtinguiſhing eſtabliſhed from diſſenting churches. It took leſs than a year

⁷⁰In their church covenant, the Separates aſſerted that Chriſt gave the church the "power," "prerogative," and "privilege" of "ſupporting and maintaining the Goſpel Miniſtry ordinances and the poor of ye Chh without uſing the Civil Sword or any Coercive means to force men thereto." *Recs. of the Canterbury Cong. Ch.*, 10, 19.

⁷¹*Recs. of the Canterbury Cong. Ch.*, 15–16.

⁷²According to the Cambridge Platform, church maintenance was a "due debt" rather than a "free gift," but the magiſtrate was only to intervene when "church-power" proved inadequate. "The Cambridge Platform," 220–21 (XI). Eccleſiaſtical taxes administered by the civil government were the norm in Connecticut by 1673. *The Book of the General Laws for the People within the Jurisdiction of Conecticut* (Cambridge, MA: Samuel Green, 1673), 52.

for Canterbury's Separates to condemn this privilege and endorse the economic separation of church and state. As New Lights, they originally desired a reformation of existing institutions from within, but as Separates demanded that the system of state support be dismantled. They rejected ecclesiastical taxes in principle and proposed freewill offerings as an alternative material foundation for religious life. A few years later, Solomon Paine would articulate this position with even more fury: he blasted the "the destructive and damning Nature of the Established Constitution of Religion in this Colony," instructing his movement that "you cannot pay" ministerial rates "without breaking a plain Command of God."⁷³ Crucially, the command to support one's own true church voluntarily entailed the reciprocal command to withhold support from false churches, even under coercion.

Because of this experimental ecclesiastical economy, material concerns dominated the early experience of Canterbury's dissenters. They were unfamiliar with the precarity of an independent church and were now harassed by the same colonial powers that once offered a safety net. The Separates' voluntary system stood little chance of success so long as they bore the burden of maintaining both their own church and their rivals'. The town installed Cogswell in 1744, levying a rate to pay for his move, settlement, and ordination service, and then adding an annual rate of £500 to cover his salary, building upkeep, and other expenses.⁷⁴ Paying ecclesiastical taxes was unsustainable for many and unconscionable for most, but civil magistrates made noncompliance as distasteful as possible. When individuals refused to pay their rates, constables distrained livestock, furniture, cookware, utensils, or whatever other personal property could be seized and sold.⁷⁵ Sometimes dissenters' own persons would be taken to the local jail until they agreed to pay.

⁷³Paine, *A Short View of the Difference*, 6, 48.

⁷⁴"Memorial of Solomon Paine, Obadiah Johnson, Edward Waldo," *Conn. Archives, Eccles.*, 10:58.

⁷⁵Paine, *A Short View of Difference*, 65.

Thus, the Separates' most urgent need was a legal defense of their property.

For Separates whose consciences (or pride) did not allow them to pay, the process of distraint was galling. The individuals responsible for enforcing the ministerial rates were the Separates' opponents in the town. Thus, when dissenters refused to pay, they suffered the humiliating experience of watching hostile neighbors "spoil" their homes, seize their goods, and then publicly auction their belongings for a fraction of their value.⁷⁶ As a result, the principled conflict over the relationship between church and state took on the character of a small-town feud. Obadiah Johnson, for example, owed a little over £30 after ignoring the ministerial rate for two years. Acting as the town's collector, Samuel Adams seized Johnson's oxen to cover the arrears. But by the time Johnson brought his case before the county court, the wrongs he alleged had compounded well beyond the livestock. First, he noted that the town also charged him £8.6.2 to pay for the trouble of seizing his property. Second, the oxen were auctioned for a mere £49 pounds, less than half of the £110 Johnson estimated to be their worth. While the defendants maintained that they could not increase the bids, Johnson accused the town of corruption: the auctioneer happened to be both "seller and buyer," purchasing the oxen himself at the heavily discounted price. In a final act of protest against the exploitative collection of an unjust tax, Johnson refused to accept the £11 surplus between the £38 tax bill and the £49 collected in the sale. As one of Canterbury's wealthiest men, he could afford this expression of defiance.⁷⁷ Johnson's individual suit had already been dismissed by the time the Separates brought their communal complaint to the assembly, but it helped set the pattern whereby they valued the cost of the

⁷⁶On goods auctioned for "less than a tenth Part of what they are worth," see Paine, *A Short View of the Difference*, 12. The best account of the experience of "being made merchandize of" by neighbors was written by another Connecticut Separate, Nathan Cole. Michael J. Crawford and Nathan Cole, "The Spiritual Travels of Nathan Cole," *WMQ* 33 (1976): 120–23.

⁷⁷Obadiah Johnson v. Samuel Adams, December Term, 1748, Windham First County Court, Conn. Archives, Eccles., 10:53a–d. On Johnson's wealth, see Jeffries, "The Separation in the Canterbury Congregational Church," 535.

colony's establishment not by the ministerial rate itself but by the total economic price they paid for their dissent. They calculated that their members had collectively lost between £400 and £500 in distrained goods by the fall of 1747.⁷⁸ With these receipts in hand, the Separates launched a new chapter in Canterbury's lawsuit-driven church history.

The New Lights delivered four petitions to the General Assembly following their theological repudiation of state-supported religion in 1745. When the first of these arrived in October of 1747, it was charged with the hot tempers of Canterbury's rancorous local situation. The civil and ecclesiastical authorities had decisively rejected the Separates' legal and theological claims to being the town's true church. Grasping for new arguments, the dissenters accused the colonial government of violating rights it ought to have protected. Their representatives before the assembly—Johnson, Edward Waldo, and their newly elected pastor, Solomon Paine—opened with a civil argument consisting of two parts. First, they laid out the boilerplate assumption that “Civil authority is ordained of god” to punish evil and reward good, from which followed that the state must defend “every one in ye free enjoyment & improvement of life liberty and propriety [property] from force . . . violence & fraud.”⁷⁹ From this premise, however, they made the radical deduction “that no Body neither single person, nor Church, nor even Commonwealth have any just title to invade the Civil rights & worldly goods of each other upon pretence of religion.”⁸⁰ The Separates had bypassed the more traditional claim to liberty of conscience, arguing that ecclesiastical taxes violated each individual's right to property.

The dissenters twice repeated the accusation that “different opinions in ecliseastick affairs” were a mere “pretence” used by the local magistrates and town majority to rob their estates.

⁷⁸“Memorial of Solomon Paine, Obadiah Johnson, Edward Waldo.”

⁷⁹On “life, liberty, and property,” see William B. Scott, *In Pursuit of Happiness: American Conceptions of Property from the Seventeenth to the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 24–35.

⁸⁰“Memorial of Solomon Paine, Obadiah Johnson, Edward Waldo.” Also see Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:481–82.

Thus, they did not use the traditional language of distressed religious minorities, accusing the colonial government of intolerance, bigotry, or even persecution. Rather they suffered "oppression," with its unmistakable economic overtones.⁸¹ Biblically, oppression named the sin of exploiting the poor, and legally, it referred to the crime of setting excessively high prices in times of scarcity.⁸² In employing this economic language, the Separates simultaneously likened Connecticut to the empires that enslaved God's people in the Old Testament and the avaricious merchants who preyed upon the needy in the markets of their own day. In other words, profit, not piety, explained the colony's ecclesiastical tax policies.

Building on these civil arguments, the Separates concluded in a prophetic register: the "King of Kings & Lord of Lords . . . hears ye cries of the oppressed," and would defend them "by his own awfull & dreadful hand of vindictive justice." Whereas their civil argument assumed a right to property derived from an account of the state, they now added a claim to possession grounded in a succinct theological definition of property itself. Property, they argued, came "by the Blessing of God in ye way of . . . industry."⁸³ It was both the natural product of labor and a divine favor from God. This dual provenance, however, meant that stripping an individual saint of their property was doubly grievous, for it was not only a sin against the individual who had earned that property by industry but also against God who had given it as a blessing. The Separates thus suggested a complex view of the relationship between labor and ownership, though they only developed a single implication: God would punish those who stole what He gave. Drawing on a long tradition in puritan political rhetoric and stuffing their case with dozens of biblical references to the Hebrew prophets, they described the punishment that Connecticut could expect for exploiting

⁸¹"Memorial of Solomon Paine, Obadiah Johnson, Edward Waldo."

⁸²"Oppression" in *Acts and Laws of Conn.*, 90–91.

⁸³"Memorial of Solomon Paine, Obadiah Johnson, Edward Waldo." Elsewhere, Solomon Paine's preferred phrase for material resources was "the good Things that God hath given them (to serve him with)." See Paine, *A Short View of Difference*, 9.

the innocent. God would not hesitate in “destroying bold & incorrigible oppressors,” and would issue “a full judgement upon this land” for its “god provoking” manner of maintaining religion.⁸⁴ These warnings revealed the theological stakes of defining property as a product of both labor and grace.

Despite the force of the Separates’ arguments, Connecticut’s General Assembly dismissed their petition. The decision included no justification, but according to Solomon Paine, the town lawyers had argued that the established church could not afford to release the dissenters from paying rates: “it would spoil the Society, for if these were released, the Charges would be so heavy upon the rest that they would forsake the Minister and save their Rates.”⁸⁵ The Standing Order feared a cascading effect when defections caused rates to increase for those who remained, and rising rates incentivized additional defections. This argument was consistent with the logic of Connecticut’s political and ecclesiastical economies. The assembly was loath to approve a new church if it would undermine the finances of an existing one, and it certainly would not impoverish a church in good standing for the sake of quarrelsome schismatics.

There was nothing for the Separates to do but continue keeping records of lost property and prepare another petition. They were ready to submit eight months later, in May of 1748. With this new petition, Canterbury joined with another Separate church and appended as many signatures—330—as they could find. Written by Solomon Paine of Canterbury and Matthew Smith of Stonington, it resembles what many would expect from early modern dissenters. The authors extolled liberty of conscience while downplaying the material interests at stake. They opened with a succinct statement of the Protestant case for dissent: God required humans to worship according to his “unerring word” rather than “the precepts of men.” Here, “conscience” named the medium through which humans perceived their duty. From this pious premise, Paine and Smith deduced

⁸⁴Memorial of Solomon Paine, Obadiah Johnson, Edward Waldo.”

⁸⁵“Answer to the Prayer of thy Memorial,” Conn. Archives, Eccles., 10:60. Also see Paine, *A Short View of Difference*, 7.

each person's "unalienable right in matters of ye worship of God to Judge for him self as his conscience receives ye dictats from God." Coercive state churches thus made "a shipwreck of a good Conscience," and even worse, they violated God's right to determine how He would be worshiped.⁸⁶ Indeed, as the Separates understood it, the right to worship freely was merely an implication of the fundamental duty to worship correctly.

Along with this theological argument for inalienable rights, the Separates developed an appeal to the 1689 Act of Toleration that had appeared briefly in the previous petition.⁸⁷ William and Mary had "indulged" Connecticut with a charter as long as it adhered to their act, which did not allow "Dissenters from the Chh of England to oblige any of a Different opinion from them to pay to their Building of their Meeting-houses or maintenance of their ministers." It was a subtle argument. The act granted peaceable Protestants the freedom to assemble and worship, but it did not free anyone from religious taxes. In fact, lest there be any misunderstanding, it clarified that "nothing herein contained shall be construed to exempt any of the persons aforesaid from paying Tythes or other Parochiall Duties."⁸⁸ By this standard, Connecticut's dissenters had enjoyed full toleration since 1708. Recognizing its narrow scope, the Separates referenced the act to remind the assembly that its state church was, paradoxically, a dissenting establishment. The Standing Order was comprised of congregationalist churches that dissented from the imperial Church of England and were included among England's nonconformist

⁸⁶"The Memorial of Solomon Paine of Canterbury in the County of Windham and Matthew Smith of Stonington in the County of New London," Terry Coll., folder 5, doc. 44. Copies also appear in Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:482; Conn. Archives, Eccles., 10:29.

⁸⁷The 1747 petition asserted that Connecticut's ecclesiastical taxes were "directly contrary . . . to the act of toleration made in ye reign of King William & maintained by our gracious King George." See "Memorial of Solomon Paine, Obadiah Johnson, Edward Waldo."

⁸⁸"An Act for Exempting their Majestyes Protestant Subjects dissenting from the Church of England from the Penalties of certaine Lawes," in John Raithby, ed., *The Statutes of the Realm* (London: History of Parliament Trust, 1819), 6:74–76.

denominations. A policy of neglect had permitted congregationalist settlers to erect ecclesiastical establishments in the New England colonies, but unlike the presbyterian establishment in Scotland, these institutions had no positive basis in imperial law and thus would persist only so long as they could keep the imperial establishment at bay.⁸⁹ The Separates no doubt found some satisfaction imagining such symmetrical justice as New England's oppressive established church being oppressed by England's more powerful established church. Yet this calculated appeal to a higher power came at a cost: it forced them to stifle their conviction that ecclesiastical taxes were intrinsically oppressive for this would indict colonial and imperial establishments alike. King George was unlikely to rescue dissenters who condemned his own church's economic foundation. Ironically, it was thus more prudent for them to call for "[repealing] all those Ecclesiastical Laws" comprising the dissenting establishment than the church rates alone.⁹⁰

Although the Separate alliance focused on the damage Connecticut's ecclesiastical laws did to their consciences rather than their estates, property rights remained the lynchpin of their case. Their claims rested less on a civil right to property and more on a theology of stewardship. The Separates' had to demonstrate that paying taxes to support a church they did not attend violated their consciences. Facing the objection that ministerial rates did "not pretend to bind Men's Consciences," but only their "temporal Things," they defended the principle that their temporal things belonged to God.⁹¹ According to their reasoning, God's "right" to determine worship invited both political and economic analogies: God not only had full "Sovereignty over" but also exclusive "propriety in" his creation. From this view of God-as-proprietor, then, the Separates went on to define themselves as essentially tenants with

⁸⁹For an excellent recent history of the British Empire's three establishments, see Katherine Carté, *Religion and the American Revolution: An Imperial History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2021).

⁹⁰"The Memorial of Solomon Paine and Matthew Smith of Stonington."

⁹¹Paine, *A Short View of Difference*, 46.

circumscribed privileges. Their "Temporal goods" were not theirs to dispose of freely but rather were received to "serve God and Honour the King." In the Separates' view, God commanded them to use their estates to support faithful worship and forbade surrendering anything in support of worship that deviated from His commands. That property also ought to "Honour the King" worked to head-off the plausible inference that the Separates' logic might apply to the Church of England.⁹² Yet the conclusion was clear: ecclesiastical laws could not violate estates without also violating consciences.

The assembly was again unmoved.⁹³ After this latest failure, Canterbury's Separates abandoned hope of legal relief. Some paid their taxes while others refused and risked costlier distraints. It was not until five years later, in 1753, that a new opportunity enticed the church into a third attempt at securing relief: a larger joint petition from Connecticut's Separates. Counting on strength in numbers, Canterbury collaborated with twenty-three other Strict Congregationalist communities. No church in the movement had more experience than Canterbury in arguing before the assembly, and since Solomon Paine had already proven himself as a mentor to Separate leaders across the region, it is likely that he took a leading role in drafting and delivering the appeal.

Like earlier petitions for tax exemption, this document contained a mix of familiar lines and experimental angles. It complained of "oppression" and reminded Connecticut's magistrates that even established congregationalists were dissenters within the larger British Empire. The Separates then sketched a set of arguments that Canterbury had not previously used. Rather than framing the violation of conscience as having to support worship they believed to be erroneous, they objected to the compulsion itself as a violation of their principles: "it is against our Consciences that ministers' Sallaries Should be Dependent on human Laws Enforced by Taxes Impositions [and] Distresses." To this argument they added another designed to

⁹²"The Memorial of Solomon Paine and Matthew Smith of Stonington."

⁹³Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:482.

appeal to the puritan commonwealth: that using civil power to maintain religion bred corruption within the state church itself. “[W]e believe it has a natural Tendency,” the petitioners stated, “to make ministers mercenary[,] to Introduce Hirelings into the Sacred Office[,] and to make merchandize of the Gospell of Christ.” All sides in the debate over establishment had become skilled analysts of the way their opponents’ high ideals disguised baser economic interests. Yet no one regarded material goods as a matter of religious indifference. With “Estates Destroyed” and having been “Deprived of the Necessaries for the Support of Life,” the twenty-three Separate churches believed that the economic costs they paid proved their commitment to Christ, the evils of establishment, and the difficulties of financing religion.⁹⁴

The appeal failed.⁹⁵ The assembly was unwilling to release an individual church from ministerial rates, much less twenty-three all at once. Such a move would have compromised the finances of dozens of state churches and set an unmistakable precedent for future dissenters. Even more discouraging for the Canterbury Separates, Solomon Paine died the next year. A leader of his stature was irreplaceable, but the church struggled to find and keep any minister. As in every stage of this story, economics determined the available options. Separate churches’ best bets were ministers who began as Paine had: a local lay leader who was already exercising his gifts in the community. Canterbury lacked an obvious candidate and thus faced the expensive prospect of settling an outside minister. Already paying rates and fines to the established church, not to mention occasional property seizures for non-payment, the church could hardly promise prospective pastors a viable livelihood. Moreover, like some other Separates, Canterbury’s congregation had grown so allergic to the idea of hireling ministers that they declined to promise any sort of salary at all. Instead, the compensation would be whatever was collected from the quarterly

⁹⁴“The Memorial of the Several Churches Commonly Called Separates,” Conn. Archives, Eccles. First Series, 10:61.

⁹⁵Larned, *History of Windham County*, 1:483.

free-will collections. This was not an enticing offer, and over four years passed between Paine's death and the installation of Joseph Marshall in 1759.⁹⁶

Ironically, these dismal conditions prepared the church finally to achieve the release from ecclesiastical taxes that had long eluded them. Paine's leadership had placed Canterbury at the center of the Separate movement in eastern Connecticut, the most fertile ground for evangelical radicalism.⁹⁷ But the Separates' collective action in 1753 demonstrated that numbers did not mean power. So, in 1760, literally and figuratively spent from the battle, the church stowed its civil and religious principles and proposed a viable legal compromise.

Canterbury's fourth and final petition since rejecting the economics of established religion relied entirely on their particular circumstances. When the church majority had separated from the town's ecclesiastical society in 1744, the town promised to exempt Separates from ministerial rates if they were granted status as a distinct ecclesiastical society by the Connecticut Assembly.⁹⁸ The offer seemed empty since the Separates would not seek recognition within the established church and the colony was unlikely to give it. But now they were sufficiently weary to consider this solution, and Cogswell agreed to lend his support. With the highest per capita wealth in Windham County, Canterbury's majority had grown wealthy enough to be merciful and waive their right to dissenting estates.⁹⁹ Obadiah Johnson—the lay leader who held the record book and had earlier paid considerably for protesting the ministerial rate—carried the document to the legislature. All of the principled theological, ecclesiastical, and civil arguments the church had brandished against Connecticut's establishment were compressed into a passing reference to “natural Right & Christian

⁹⁶Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England*, 143–48. For Separates' position on salaries, see Ebenezer Frothingham, *The Articles of Faith and Practice, with the Covenant, That Is Confessed by the Separate Churches of Christ in General in This Land* (Newport, RI: Printed by J. Franklin, 1750), 304–9.

⁹⁷Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee*, 258.

⁹⁸“At a Society Meeting of the first Society, December 16, 1744.”

⁹⁹Jeffries, “The Separation in the Canterbury Congregational Church,” 525.

liberty.” But the document raised these concepts only to brush them aside. In doing so, the church explicitly severed its ties to the larger Separate campaign against ecclesiastical taxes. Canterbury’s circumstances were “extraordinary” and “singular,” the Separates assured, such that their exemption could not be used as an “Example” by any “in New England if in the World.” In other words, the assembly could grant Canterbury’s request without acknowledging any injustice to other Separates or unexempted dissenters in the colony.¹⁰⁰

Persuaded that this petition would not jeopardize the Standing Order’s economic structure and reassured by the town’s endorsement, the assembly granted the Separates society privileges. As a distinct ecclesiastical society, they would be “Released and Discharged from paying” all taxes levied by the original society responsible for Cogswell’s salary and the old meetinghouse. This arrangement was not, however, a full reconciliation between Canterbury’s established and Separate churches: the Separates remained dissenters, and their children would have to opt-in to their church at age twenty-one or default back onto the establishment’s ecclesiastical tax lists.¹⁰¹ But designating the Separates a society was a way to satisfy their request while maintaining the authority of the colony’s civil and ecclesiastical powers to tax estates for the maintenance of religion.

Canterbury’s Separates had to have known that many would interpret this maneuver as a betrayal. Represented by Ebenezer Frothingham, the broader Separate movement rebuked the church for forsaking the synthesis of spiritual and civil principles that had defined their protest. Frothingham, the pastor of a Separate church in Middletown, had published an influential treatise defending Separatism and stood as the movement’s preeminent public apologist.¹⁰² He condemned

¹⁰⁰“The Memorial of the Inhabitants in the First Society in Canterbury,” Conn. Archives, Eccles., First Series, 11:246.

¹⁰¹“Upon the Memorial of the Inhabitants in the First Society in Canterbury,” Conn. Archives, Eccles., First Series, 11:247.

¹⁰²Frothingham, *Articles of Faith and Practice*; Also see *A Key, to Unlock the Door, That Leads in, to Take a Fair View of the Religious Constitution, Established by Law*

the Canterbury Separates' decision to appeal for official recognition from the civil government. In his view, they had won their temporal rights by defaulting on their spiritual duties. While the assembly had granted their release from taxes, it was not a victory for religious liberty. In fact, it had cost them liberty of conscience. According to the Separates' strict ethos, liberty of conscience meant the liberty to obey conscience, and Frothingham upbraided the Canterbury church for disobeying what they knew to be God's commands against cooperation with state-backed religion. Thus, the town's dissenters had become as much enemies to freedom of conscience as Connecticut's government. Their joint action with the established church constituted a reunion with an "Antichristian Head" that "Hates our Dear Lord," and their acceptance of society privileges from the assembly meant submission to an "Ungodly Constitution." Frothingham continued in this apocalyptic theme with a pointed reference to the mark of the beast described in Revelation: the church had traded liberty of conscience for the "Liberty to buy and sell," a damning allusion to the economic interests that it had secured.¹⁰³ While the emphasis on religious or economic liberties had varied between petitions, they unanimously testified to the interdependence of the rights of conscience and property. Yet in this final gambit, Canterbury's Separates appeared to detach the two. And worse, in winning their liberty from oppressive taxes by submitting to Connecticut's establishment, they subordinated the spiritual to the material.

Confronted with this reproof, Canterbury's Separates repented for compromising with the system of ecclesiastical taxes.¹⁰⁴ Most other Separates, however, continued to shun the demoralized community. It is an important reminder that in

in the Colony of Connecticut (New Haven: Benjamin Mecom, 1767); Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England*, 126–36.

¹⁰³"The Congregational Church in Middleton to the Congregational Church in Canterbury, August 15, 1765," Terry Coll., folder 17, doc. 169. Also see Revelation 13:17 (KJV).

¹⁰⁴"Committee to the Congregational Church of Christ in Canterbury, August 22, 1766," Terry Coll., folder 18, doc. 171; *Recs. of the Canterbury Cong. Ch.* 26–27.

eighteenth-century New England, the most ferocious advocates for liberty of conscience were those who placed the strictest demands on conscience. So, the First Church of Canterbury, as they still called themselves, abandoned their leading position in the campaign against New England's state churches. The community that had helped guide the Separate movement through its first decade would spend the next seventy years dwindling in isolation.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion: The Substance of Religion

Canterbury's trajectory after the Great Awakening was shaped by New England's overlapping civil and ecclesiastical governments, as well as its entangled spiritual and material economies. On one level, the legal fallout from the schism in the 1740s fits easily in the local tradition of churches prosecuting their economic interests through lawsuits and petitions. Yet there was also an attempted revolution in ecclesiastical economics: Connecticut law pushed churches into an economy that depended upon acquiring and keeping taxable estates, but Canterbury's Separates sought to overthrow this system in favor of voluntary, freewill offerings. Throughout the 1740s and 1750s, they cycled rapidly through arguments, appealing to everything from communal property rights rooted in state-recognized ecclesiastical constitutions to individual property rights rooted in natural law. Other dissenters would pick up where Canterbury's Separates left off, fighting to win tax exemptions and chip away at Connecticut's Standing Order until its collapse in 1818.¹⁰⁶

In this foundational sequence, when radical New Light identity and politics were still taking form, a striking fact emerges: the struggle to define the proper relationship between church

¹⁰⁵The Canterbury Separate Church ceased operations in 1831. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England*, 75.

¹⁰⁶For an excellent overview of Connecticut's path to disestablishment, see Robert J. Imholt, "Connecticut: A Land of Steady Habits," in *Disestablishment and Religious Dissent: Church-State Relations in the New American States, 1776–1833*, ed. Carl H. Esbeck and Jonathan J. Den Hartog (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2019), 327–50.

and state in colonial New England was ignited by questions of property. Canterbury's chapter in this story began with a usurped meetinghouse and unfolded as a defense of individual estates. No simple policy of toleration could settle the religious controversies opened by the revivals because so much property was at stake. When the principles of religious equality and liberty of conscience eventually surfaced, they stood atop the humiliations, indignations, and resentments of the material oppressions that preceded them. Matters of worship and conscience were thus fastened to the material world: land, fences, timber, keys, buildings, plates, cups, books, and livestock. The struggle for religious liberty in colonial Connecticut was *really* about these things—these properties, and the costs of holding, losing, and recovering them. Recognizing this economic base, however, entails no reductionism. From 1703 to 1760 and beyond, the premise of lawsuits, petitions, censures, and protests in Canterbury was that these things were the substance of religion.

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