

A Modest Proposal



Let's stop using the term "puritan." The migrants to English America, to whom the label has become attached, did not embrace the term, making it historically inaccurate. More importantly, our misappropriation of "puritan" has allowed scholars to ignore and the public to misunderstand religion. The price we pay in the present is a stunted and politicized understanding of the past. Instead, I propose we choose more accurate terms, accepting that "puritan" is almost never what we intend.

The term "puritan" emerged during the sixteenth century in debates over the nature of the Church of England. Supporters of the church's modest reformation derided opponents who wanted a more vigorously reformed church as "puritan." These critics sought to impose Calvinist style discipline on their communities. As a result, the label entered popular use as a taunt against those seen as rigid and judgmental. Unsurprisingly, the subjects of the term "puritan" never embraced the epithet.

This period in English history when godly reformers worked within the established church in hopes of its reformation lasted until the 1630s, when Archbishop William Laud's persecutions dashed these hopes. On the English side of the Atlantic, the movement for reform within the established church foundered on Laudian persecution, Atlantic migration, and (after 1640) the

fragmentation associated with the civil wars and revolution.



Figure 1: John Barker (1811-1886), *Battle of Marston Moor*. Cheltenham Art Gallery and Museums, Gloucestershire, UK. Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The name “puritan” became almost exclusively associated with New England, but individuals who had pushed for a more extensive church reformation and for godly discipline scattered throughout the English Americas and the wider Atlantic. Moreover, not all New Englanders had ever identified with a Calvinist-inspired deeper reformation of the English national church.

Reformers who once hoped to work within the established church used the freedom that they found in migration to create a new church order. Across the Atlantic, distance and a lack of oversight liberated them from the constraints that the Church of England imposed. They fashioned congregationalism, a Protestant variant that embraced Calvinist theology and emphasized discipline and congregational independence. They agreed on this church order, which they described generally as “the churches of Christ” and with ecclesiastical specificity as “congregational.”

A
PLATFORM OF
CHURCH DISCIPLINE

GATHERED OUT OF THE WORD OF GOD:
AND AGREED UPON BY THE ELDERS:
AND MESSENGERS OF THE CHURCHES
ASSEMBLED IN THE SYNOD AT CAMBRIDGE
IN NEW ENGLAND

To be presented to the Churches and General Court
for their consideration and acceptance,
in the Lord.

The Eighth Moneth Anno 1649

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- Psal: 84. 1. *How amiable are thy Tabernacle O Lord of Hosts?*
Psal: 26. 8. *Lord I have loved the habitation of thy house & the
place where thine honour dwelleth.*
Psal: 27. 4. *One thing have I desired of the Lord that will I seek
after, that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the
dayes of my life to behold the Beauty of the Lord & to
inquire in his Templ.*
-

Printed at Cambridge by S G in New England
and are to be sold at Cambridge and Boston
Anno Dom: 1649.

4 Wee do not think it meet, or safe, for a member of a presbyteriall Church, forthwith to desert his relation to his Church, betake himself to the fellowship of a Congregati- nall Church, though he may discern some defect in the estate, or govern- ment of his owne.

For 1 Faithfullness of brotherly love in Church-relation, requireth, that the members of the Church should first convince their brethren of their sinfull defects, & duely wait for their reformation, before they depart from them. For if wee must take such a course for the healing of a private brother, in a way of brotherly love, with much meekness, & patience: how more ought wee so to walk with like tendrness, towards a whole church.

Again 2 By the hasty departure of sound members from a defective church, reformation is not promoted, but many times retarded, & corruption increased. Whereas on the contrary, while sincere members breathing after purity of refor- mation abide together, they may (by the blessing of God upon their faithfull endeavours) prevale much with their Elders, & neighbours towards a reforma- tion; it may be, so much, as that their Elders in their own church shall receive none to the Lords table, but visible saints: & in the Classis shall put forth no authoritative act, but consultative only) touching the members of other churches; nor touching their own, but with the consent (if it consent at least) of their own church: which two things, if they can obteyn with any humble, meek, holy, faithfull endeavours, wee conceiv, they might (by the grace of Christ find liber- ty of conscience to continue their relation with their own presbyteriall church, without scruple.

5 But to add a word farther, touching the gathering of Churches, out of Churches, what if there were no expresse example of such a thing extant in the Scrip- tures? that which wee are wont to answer the Antipaedobaptists, may suffice here: it is enough, if any evidence thereof may be gathered from just consequenc of Scripture light. Doctor Ames his judgme: concerning this case, passeth (for ought wee know) without excep- ion, which he gave in his 4. booke of case in Ans to 2 Qu: C 14. Num 16.

If any (saith he) wronged with unjust vexation, or providing for his own edi- ficat. o or in testimony against sin depart from a church where some evils are tollerated, & joyn himself to another more pure, yet without cōdemning of the church he leaveth, he is not therefore to be held as a schismaticke, or as guilty of any other sin.

Where the Tripartite a Junction, which the judicious Doctor putteth, declareth the lawfulness of the departure of a Church-member from a church, when either through weariness of unjust vexation, or in way of provision for his own edification, or in testimony against sin, he joyneth himself to another con- greg- on more reformed. Any one of these, he judgeth a just & lawfull cause of departing

As a

though

Figures 2a and 2b: The term "congregational" is used in Cambridge Synod, A Platform of Church Discipline (Cambridge, MA, 1649), ch. 5, point 1, unpaginated, a document known more commonly as *The Cambridge Platform*. Courtesy of the [Internet Archive](https://www.archive.org/).

In the meantime, in England itself, the godly shunted aside the Church of England and tried to use the power of Parliament to organize the creation of a better (to their lights) established church. That effort collapsed, even as the religious landscape fractured into numerous religious expressions.

Presbyterians with ties to (or a deep admiration of) the Scottish kirke failed to gain control of England's religious settlement.

Independents—ecclesiastically more akin to the newly minted New England congregationalist orthodoxy—never had a chance to shape the national church settlement in England. Through the 1650s they gained a reputation for radicalism, particularly in London, that encouraged the church leaders in Massachusetts to distance themselves from them, effectively eschewing the term "Independent" for their own churches as a result. Meanwhile, others (including

Baptists and, using the term “church” loosely, Quakers) furthered the fragmentation of England’s religious landscape.

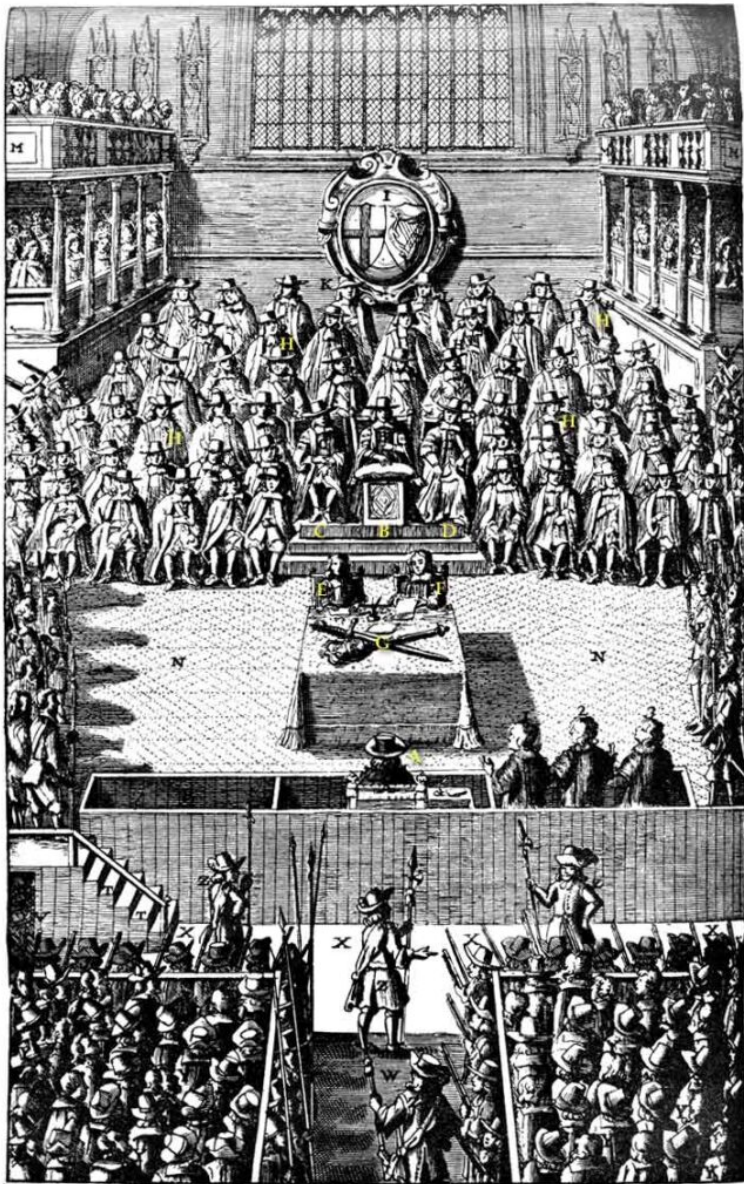


Figure 3: Engraving from “Nalson’s Record of the Trial of Charles I” in the British Museum. Plate 2 from *A True Copy of the Journal of the High Court of Justice for the Tryal of K. Charles I as it was Read in the House of Commons and Attested Under the Hand of Phelps, Clerk to that Infamous Court / Taken by J. Nalson Jan. 4, 1683: With a Large Introduction* (London: Printed by H.C. for Thomas Dring, 1684). Uncredited engraver, public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

By 1650, the puritan movement was effectively over, whether we understand it narrowly as a reformed movement willing to remain within and fight to improve an inadequate national church or more capaciously as a unified community of godly reformers working together to reorganize religion and society.

In England, subsequently, the term took on a political meaning. Nineteenth-

century scholars concerned with the constitutional issues they saw as central to mid-seventeenth-century revolutionary upheaval dubbed it “the Puritan Revolution.” In this, they followed a revised meaning attached to the term that, by the early eighteenth century, had claimed “puritan” as encompassing only the moderate mid-century Parliamentarians dominated by the Presbyterians and opposed to regicide. Limiting the movement to this slice of it eliminated its radicalism, a narrowing that disavowed the radical religious roots of revolution by focusing on the Parliamentarians who opposed its excesses. If these moderates were the puritans, any “revolution” named for them could not have been especially revolutionary.



Figure 4: *The Execution of King Charles I* (unknown artist, ca. 1649). Public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Execution_of_Charles_I.jpg).

These scholars rehabilitated the puritans into benign moderates who could serve as worthy antecedents to the Whigs, as Mark Goldie has shown in his assessment of late seventeenth-century “puritan whigs.” In this way, the term lost its original meaning (deriding those who sought other ecclesiastical forms and

greater social controls) and came to denote the most moderate Dissenters, those who by 1700 were inspired by whiggish principles in favor of a limited monarchy and religious tolerance. The revolution associated with these moderates they dubbed “Glorious” for its lack of revolutionary violence, distancing it from the excesses of regicide and calls for drastic social transformation which they abhorred.



Figure 5: William enters London in December 1688 during the Glorious Revolution. Romeyn de Hooghe, *The Reception of His Royal Highness the Prince of Orange at his Entering London* (ca. 1690). Romeyn de Hooghe, public domain, via [Wikimedia Commons](#).

The term has had its most lasting power in New England and has done the greatest damage to our historical understanding there. Like their counterparts in England, those godly men and women who migrated across the Atlantic were no more likely to value the appellation as their own. They did not describe themselves as puritan (nor, for that matter, did they use the phrase Perry Miller decades ago attached to them, “non-separating congregationalist”).

Free to do as they pleased, religiously speaking, the migrants moved beyond

reforming the Church of England from within to establish their own version of a well-organized reformed church. If they hoped briefly that their example would inspire church-making efforts in England, that consideration was a distant second to their primary concern of creating the New England way centered around “churches of Christ” organized in each town in the colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Haven.



Figure 6: *Christ Church, 1723* (United States: s.n., ca. 1875). Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

In New England, puritan came to mean (in its most narrow, religious sense), the new ecclesiastical and doctrinal forms hammered out in those three colonies. In this vein, much scholarship discussed the relationship between the church established in Plymouth Plantation (based on practices transferred from the exiled separatist community in the Netherlands) and those “puritan” churches organized in other parts of New England. As events unfolded, little

distinguished the puritan from the separatist imports, although those older and increasingly irrelevant terms continued in use among scholars interested in identifying and understanding their interplay.

“Puritan” has been used capaciously, moving beyond acknowledging the relationship between the earlier English reform movement and the later New England church establishment. Every New England minister for a century has been declared a puritan, which has come to mean simply a clergyman serving in New England.

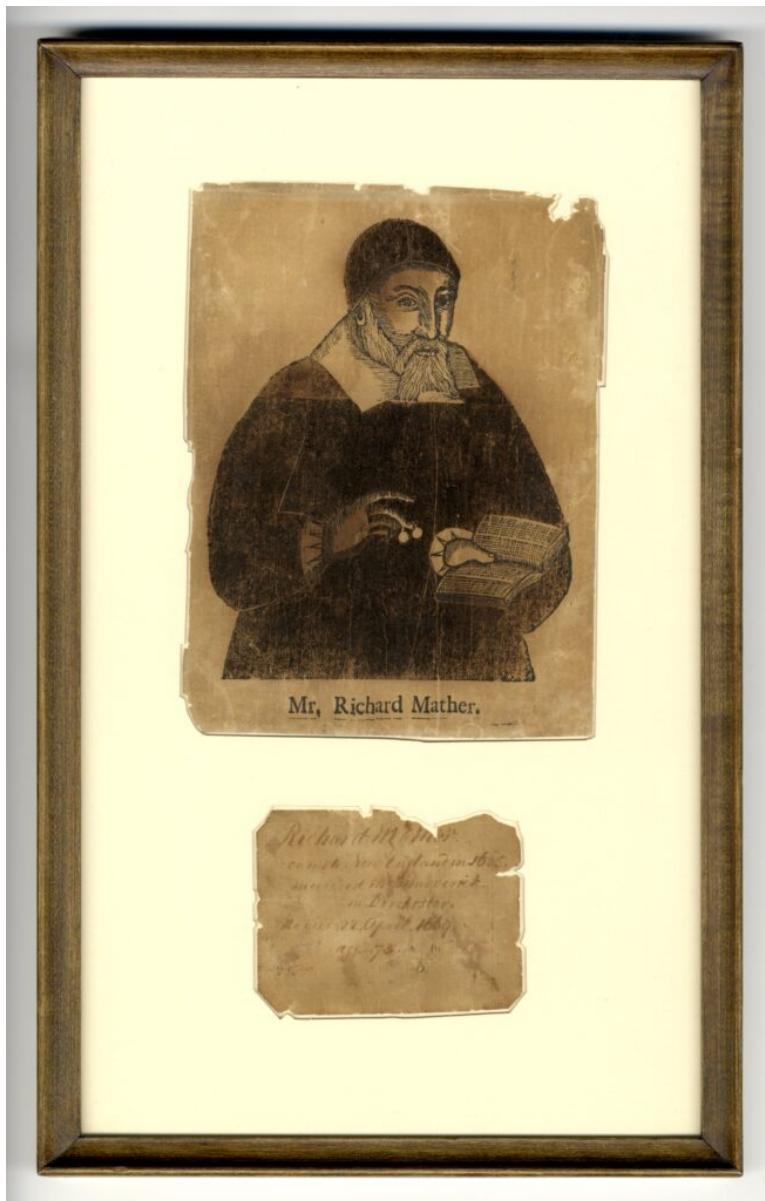


Figure 7: John Foster, *Mr. Richard Mather* (Massachusetts: s.n., ca. 1670). Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

The term is so entrenched that many people—whether scholars or a member of the wider American public—identify the local church establishment as “puritan,” as if that were the equivalent of a denomination or national church order such as

Presbyterian or Anglican. Historians who study other aspects of early America or later periods of U.S. history have told me that they thought that New England churches adhered to a denomination dubbed "puritan." Textbook maps have been known to distinguish puritan New England from Quaker Pennsylvania, as if there were some equivalences between the organized Society of Friends and a similarly organized institution known as "puritan." Such an organization did not exist, and indeed has never existed.

Beyond the ill-informed sense that New England boasted an ecclesiastical form known as "the puritan church," the term has come to stand in for the entire region in all its (usually unacknowledged) complexity. References to "Puritan New England" are common, even (or perhaps especially) in relation to subjects that have nothing to do with the difference among religious faiths and practices.

Using the word implies some religious connection, which fits with the idea that the region was uniquely devout, even when religion is far from the topic at hand. "Puritan" stands for the culture of New England, a culture that is assumed to be religious at its root. Scholarship too easily treats much of what occurred there, ranging from the execution of witches to fights over political economy or foreign policy, as if the puritanism of the region guided events. Popular opinion often derides the puritans as excessive religious hypocrites—a usage that inspires humorous (albeit historically inaccurate) Valentine's Day cards denouncing desire and dancing as supposedly prohibited to puritans. Such joking references are, ironically, closest to the original meaning of the taunts aimed at overeager reformers.

This usage is both vague and exceedingly widespread. On some level, the term intends to mark the entire area (from the fishing villages of Maine through the merchant houses of Newport, Rhode Island, and on to the farms of Connecticut) as adhering, and adhering deeply, to a distinct religious culture. Puritan New England in this view represents a contrast to other British North American colonial regions, none of which are known for their overwhelming religiosity. In particular, the term sharply contrasts with the Chesapeake (and the mainland South more generally), where the settlers allegedly cared only for profit and attention to religion was purportedly weak to nonexistent.



Figure 8: John Carwitham, *A South East View of the Great Town of Boston in New England in America* (London: Printed for Carington Bowles, [between 1730 and 1760?]). Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

The terminology of “Puritan New England” has become so common as a synonym for the region that some scholars and many laypeople reference all the people dwelling there as puritan—regardless of their degree of religiosity, of their specific religious orientation, or of the matter at hand. We have puritan fisherfolk, farmers, artisans, merchants. Indeed, everyone can be dubbed a puritan when it is a synonym for “English person living in New England.” That people who held the same commitment to reformed religion also resided in the Chesapeake cannot be accommodated in this false but pervasive binary.

The sloppy way in which we use the term feeds the idea—popular in certain U.S. political circles—that one group who migrated to North America was intensely religious, created a region shaped solely by their faith, agreed on the necessity of making religion central to their lives, and established a model society to which the United States must return. This erroneous perception has been exploited by those interested in establishing the idea of the U.S. as a Christian nation from the first, an identity to which they declare that we must revert, by force if necessary.

This representation offers the antithesis to those taunts in the popular imagination, approving of the purported traits of the puritans without understanding their history or their faith any better than the makers of greeting cards do. When we are negligent about the realities of the past, we

play into the hands of the Christian America mythmakers, who read the jeremiads Perry Miller discussed so brilliantly as straight reporting and who want to return to a day when all residents were required to sit and to listen to such a harangue.



Figure 9: Winter Sunday in Olden Times (Boston: F. Gleason, ca. 1875).
Courtesy, American Antiquarian Society.

If pressed, most of us know that puritanism was not a religion, that not everyone in New England shared the same views, and that some people who were attuned with the congregational orthodoxy of (some of) the northern English colonies lived in other locations. Yet the shorthand use of a term that was somewhat outdated in 1630 became entirely inapplicable shortly thereafter. It not only fails to capture the religious culture of a region, but it is useless in any legitimate attempt to explain its entire history.

I propose we drop the term puritan and say what we mean—with due regard for whether we intend New England residents generally or want to say something specific about the congregationalist church order adopted widely, but not uniformly, in the region. I promise we won't miss it! As proof of that point, I just published a [long book review](#) on a fabulous book on seventeenth-century debates over the imperial constitution (including its religious and political aspects) for the oh-so-rigorously edited *William and Mary Quarterly*. I never

used the term and the editors never commented. Perhaps they noticed the omission, but they made no case for its inclusion, because of course it was absolutely unnecessary.

If I cannot persuade everyone to drop the term altogether—unless of course they are writing about late-sixteenth-century ecclesiastical and social reformers in the Church of England—could I at least get everyone to agree to use lower case: puritan?

Further Reading

Mark Goldie, *Roger Morrice and the Puritan Whigs: The Entering Book, 1677-1691* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2016).

Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 105.

Adrian Chastain Weimer, *A Constitutional Culture: New England and the Struggle against Arbitrary Rule in the Restoration Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023).

This article originally appeared in May 2024.

Carla Gardina Pestana teaches at UCLA. She writes about religion and empire in England's Atlantic colonies, especially in the seventeenth century. Her most recent book is *The World of Plymouth Plantation* (2020). She recently persuaded the *New England Quarterly* editorial team of the wisdom of the lower case "p."