

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT 4

Maryland Toleration Act, 1649



BECAUSE of intolerance in Protestant England, Lord Baltimore, a Roman Catholic aristocrat, wanted to start a colony where he could freely practice his Roman Catholic religion. He founded Maryland in 1634 from land granted him by King Charles I. To protect religious freedom, the colony passed a Toleration Act in 1649. This act allowed all Christian settlers to worship as they wished. It was the first legislative act of religious toleration in the colonies.

FORASMUCH as in a well governed and Christian Common Wealth matters concerning Religion and the honor of God ought in the first place to bee taken, into serious consideration and endeavoured to be settled. . . .

. . . [W]hereas the inforcing of the conscience in matters of Religion hath frequently fallen out to be of dangerous Consequence in those commonwealthes where it hath been practised, And for the more quiett and peaceable governement of this Province, and the better to preserve mutual Love and amity amongst the Inhabitants thereof. Be it Therefore . . . enacted . . . that noe person or persons whatsoever within this Province, or the Islands, Ports, Harbors, Creekes, or havens thereunto belonging professing to believe in Jesus Christ, shall from henceforth bee any waies troubled, Molested, or discountenanced for or in respect of his or her religion nor in the free exercise thereof within this Province or the Islands thereunto belonging nor any way compelled to the beleife or exercise of any other religion against his or her consent, soe as they be not unfaithful to the

Lord Proprietary, or molest or conspire against the civill Government established or to bee established in this Province under him or his heires. And that all & every person and persons that shall presume Contrary to this Act and the true intent and meaning thereof directly or indirectly either in person or estate willfully to wronge, disturb, trouble, or molest any person whatsoever within this Province professing to believe in Jesus Christ for or in respect of his or her religion or the free exercise thereof within this Province other than is provided for in this Act that such person or persons soe offending shalbe compelled to pay trebble damages to the party soe wronged or molested, and for every such offence shall also forfeit 20s sterling in money or the value thereof. . . . Or if the parties soe offending as aforesaid shall refuse or bee unable to recompense the party soe wronged, or to satisfy such ffyne or forfeiture, then such offender shalbe severely punished by publick whipping and imprisonment during the pleasure of the Lord proprietary, or his Leiuutenant or cheife Governor of this Province. . . .

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. What is the main theme of the Maryland Toleration Act?
2. As stated in the document, what penalty will be imposed on a person interfering with another's expression or exercise of religious faith?
3. What penalty will be imposed on a person unable to pay a fine or forfeit?