

AN EXAMPLE OF AN "A" PAPER - History 451

This paper earned an A because it not only responds in a clear and organized way to the assignment—discuss the limits Roger Williams, William Penn, and the Maryland Assembly may have imposed on liberty of conscience—but also because it utilizes primary sources and develops an original insight—that each author articulated a position on conscience that best suited them. This argument takes the essay beyond what was required and represents the kind of original thinking that I admire. There are some minor writing problems and some questionable statements, as the marginal comments indicate, but the essay's intelligence overcomes these slight defects, and, overall, it is well organized, clearly written, and cleverly argued.

*The text retains the corrections I made on the original. ~~Strikeouts~~ indicate words or phrases to be eliminated, **boldface** words or phrases that should be inserted, and **[bracketed text in red]** marginal comments (usually on the essay's contents). The final paragraph in courier new type is the comment I appended to the original.*

Compare the limits, if any, imposed by Roger Williams, William Penn, and the Maryland Assembly (in the "Act Concerning Religious Toleration") on liberty of conscience.

The New England colonies of Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Maryland **[Pa. and Md. are not in New England]** were founded with the express purpose of dispensing ~~of~~ **with** a state church **[not exactly. Rhode Island was “put together.” Maryland did not have a single state church, but the Calverts did not intend to dispense with state support of a church]**. In this they deviated not only from the other British colonies in the New World but also from their Motherland and indeed all the civilizations of western Christendom to date. Before the founding of ~~Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Maryland~~ **these three colonies**, a state without an official state church was inconceivable. As the Church of England evolved in Britain, the other British colonies in North America adopted either Congregationalism, Anglicanism, or Presbyterianism **[never a state church in the colonies]** as their own “state church.” The idea of a state without a state church was unprecedented (Cohen 9/30).

In place of the usual state church, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Maryland adopted a new concept: “liberty of conscience.” Here, “liberty” is synonymous with “freedom.” By “conscience” our forefathers meant one's personal religious persuasion and its duties, as Roger Williams explained to Governor John Endicott: “∴ I speake of *Conscience*, a *perswasion* fixed in the minde and heart of a man, which inforceth him to judge (as *Paul* said of himself a *persecutour*) and to doe so and so, with respect to God, his worship, etc.” (Williams 340) To the first citizens of Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Maryland, civil “freedom of conscience” was the ability to live freely as a member of one's religion—that is, to perform such religious exercises as their faith required without fear of prosecution by the state. **[good]** “Freedom to be ruled by God” is how historian Timothy D. Hall describes Roger Williams's concept of religious liberty (11), whereas William Penn explained “liberty of conscience” as “the free and uninterrupted exercise of our conscience in that way of worship we are most clearly persuaded God requires us to serve Him in” (Penn 67).

In each of these ~~three~~ colonies, liberty of conscience took the form of what liberty best

suiting the religious persuasions of the persons in power in the colony, whether the founder or a governing body. [very good] Rhode Island allowed a great deal of religious liberty because Roger Williams, its founder, necessitated [word choice] much liberty in his own spiritual pursuits. William Penn, a Quaker, drew on his experiences with religious persecution and the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light in organizing the colony of Pennsylvania. The Quakers put minimal bounds on individual spiritual seeking; Penn ~~only articulated~~ **articulated only** the most minimal [“minimal” repeated] of religious requirements for citizens of Pennsylvania **Pennsylvania's citizens**. Finally, the Maryland Assembly—comprised of Catholics who ruled a largely Protestant population—composed the Act Concerning Religious Toleration, which gave liberty of conscience to Christians in general.

Rhode Island

Rhode Island was the first polity with absolute religious liberty as its cornerstone (Cohen 9/30). Its founder, Roger Williams, put no limits on his colony's religious liberty because he could not delimit his own religious beliefs. Banished from the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1636 for denouncing state-supported Puritanism, the onetime Puritan minister fled to Rhode Island, where he founded and briefly belonged to a Baptist church. But neither the Puritan establishment nor the Baptist parish [Baptists didn't have parishes]—nor, ultimately, any other official version of Christianity—measured up to Williams's exacting standards of faith. Hall explains that Williams's conscience quivered at the slightest stain and the most insignificant spiritual error in religious establishments (24). Williams's uncompromising spirituality ultimately found him churchless, yet he remained tolerant of all established churches, since none of them were sufficiently pure. It was only within such a system that he could practice his own unorthodox Christianity, which he preached to his family at home. He thus founded the colony of Rhode Island “... On a *Moderation* toward the Spirits and *Consciences* of all mankinde, meerly differing from or opposing yours with onely Religious and Spirituall opposition” (Williams 346). Because religious difference was a “mere” concern in matters of state, government should “leave untroubled the consciences of its citizens” (Hall 5-6). Religion and the state should not mix; citizens should be left to practice whatever faith they wished. [were there any problems with this position?]

Pennsylvania

William Penn's experiences and beliefs as a Quaker inspired his “holy experiment” with religious liberty in Pennsylvania. First, Penn believed in religious tolerance, having been jailed thrice for being a Quaker. The primary recipients of this new tolerance were to be, of course, Quakers, meaning that the **state colony** of Pennsylvania abolished British practices like tithes, oaths, and church courts, and sanctioned Quaker customs of oaths, peace, marriage, and morality (Frost 27). Citizens of other religious persuasions would be subject to governance by Quaker principles (Frost 18). Penn cited the Quakers' troubled history to justify these radical measures: “... liberty of conscience, as thus stated and defended, we ask as our undoubted right by the law of God, of nature, and of our own country. It has been often promised; we have long waited for it; we have writ much and suffered more in its defense, and have made many true complaints, but found little or no redress” (Penn 83).

While in prison, Penn authored tracts which proposed that a religious "invisible hand" would guarantee peace in the state despite the presence of many different religions: the diverse beliefs which would result from people following their own consciences would make for secure interests all around. Penn's Quakerism, especially the Quaker doctrine of the Inner Light, shines through this idea. Quakers believed that each person, through the piece of divinity all possess, could encounter the sacred without the mediation of clergy or sacrament. Penn was willing to extend this theology of individual empowerment to the state, yielding a body of citizens whose own individual pursuits would nonetheless make them part of a community. In practice, political self-determinism meant that "no person or persons shall be bound by the Act or Acts, Vote or Votes of any Majority but only by his or her own free consent" (Penn, 16). [his English Whiggery had something to do with this position too]

However, as the self-directed Quakers united themselves via a few central beliefs, so Penn had to articulate certain religious characteristics of the citizenry in the interests of peace (Frost 11). He drew up a series of laws that betrayed the limits of toleration in Pennsylvania. Over several years, these laws were revised several times. At first, they required that citizens be monotheists, then theists, and finally trinitarians. Along the way, these laws mandated that the Sabbath be observed on the first day of the week, that voters profess faith in Christ, that only Christians serve in the executive and legislative branches of government, that citizens acknowledge the divine inspiration of holy scripture, and that state officials honor the Act of Toleration, whether by oath or affirmation (Cohen 9/30). Together, these legal codes comprise the limits imposed upon liberty of conscience by William Penn, founder of the Quaker colony of Pennsylvania.

Maryland

Lord Baltimore, a Catholic, founded the colony of Maryland, and the Catholic majority in the colonial government drafted the "Act Concerning Religious Tolerance" [Act Concerning Religion] in 1649. Unlike Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, Maryland was not so much a haven for dissenters, sectarians, or religious anomalies as an experiment in Catholic/Protestant cohabitation. Catholics occupied high governmental posts, but had to share any rights they desired with their Protestant constituents in order to insure political stability—or, as they put it, "for the more quiett and peaceable government of this Province, and the better to preserve mutuall Love and amity amongst the inhabitants thereof" (Stone 246); thus asserting that [ensuring Catholic uniformity?] Catholicism was not as important as pleasing [word choice - preserving Catholic worship was certainly important] the Protestants, who would then support Catholic rule. To that end, the General Assembly of Maryland stipulated a handful of Christian behaviors and beliefs as the minimum requirements for Maryland religionists. They were, for the most part, held in common by Catholics and Protestants. The Act forbade the blasphemy or denial of the Holy Trinity in any permutation, the blasphemy of the name of the Virgin Mary, the Apostles, the Evangelists, and the like; and the labeling of anyone as a "heritick, Scismatick, Idolator, puritan, Independent, Prespiterian popish prest, Jesuite, Jesuited papist, Lutheran, Calvinist, Anabaptist, Brownist, Antinomian, Barrowist, Roundhead, Separatist or any other name or terme ... relating to the matter of Religion" (Stone 245). It also mandated the observance of the Sabbath and the profession of faith in Jesus Christ. To venture any further in religious stipulations [word choice] would mean confronting such touchy issues as sacraments and divine

revelation. [elaborate. Why wouldn't the Legislature want to do this?] The Catholics wisely stopped short of these theological minefields; so as to maintain peace—and Catholic rule—in the colony of Maryland.

Conclusion

In 1791, Congress passed the First Amendment to the Constitution, which prevented American state or [no—only federal government] federal governments to **from** passing laws “respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free, exercise thereof” (Hall 1). This easy [oh?] mandate came only after the experiments of Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Maryland—experiments, which exposed much state [?] influence in matters of religion, because religious people were behind the state. [unclear] Even in these trials of “liberty of conscience,”; individual ideologies and interests came to the fore, causing each state to construe religious freedom in a particular way. In Rhode Island, Roger Williams tolerated all churches so that he might explore his own motley [hmmmm] theology. In Pennsylvania, William Penn's experiences and theology as a Quaker came to influence state organization. And in Maryland, a Catholic Assembly maintained minimal [?] Christianity in order to please its Protestant constituents. Whether three hundred years ago, two hundred years ago, or today, “freedom of religion” can easily become used in the interests of those in power.

Works Cited

Cohen, Charles L. Lectures for History 451: Early American Religious History. Fall 1999.

Frost, J. William. “Chapter 1: The Creation of Religious Liberty in Early Pennsylvania,” from *A Perfect Freedom*.

Hall, Timothy L. *Separating Church and State: Roger Williams and Religious Liberty*. University of Illinois Press, Chicago: 1998,

Maryland Assembly. “Act Concerning Religion” [1649].

Penn, William. “The Great Case of Liberty of Conscience” [1670].

Williams, Roger. “To Governor John Endicott, ca. August-September 1651.”

You've written a paper that is excellent in many respects. The contention that in each case liberty of conscience took the form best suited to the religious persuasions of the people in power is a formidable insight. The concluding paragraph is weak: why bring up the First Amendment? A few statements bear elaborating; on p. 4, for instance, you might explain why the Maryland Assembly did not want to confront definitions of the sacraments. The reference to "invisible hand" on p. 3 is jarring because, whether intentionally or not, it invokes Adam Smith and confuses the issue. Penn's defense of liberty of conscience had more to do with, say, the Magna Carta than with the doctrine of laissez-faire, and he would have abhorred the notion that the mere operation of different sects would have guaranteed state peace. The existence of multiple religious bodies did not necessarily upset the state, he believed—indeed, persecution conducted to instability, hence letting different religious bodies co-exist strengthened the state—but government had an active role to play in enforcing moral order. Overall, though, this is a very fine essay. **A**