

# Use of Federal Funds to Restore Churches Questioned

A church-state dispute of historical proportions is brewing in Maryland.

Cardinal William H. Keeler of Baltimore is seeking federal funds to help restore the 197-year-old Basilica of the Assumption, the nation's oldest Catholic cathedral.

Americans United for the Separation of Church and State said a recent decision by the Bush administration to allow religious sites to receive money from Save America's Treasures, a restoration project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the National Park Service, is inappropriate.

"If you have an active church, then I think you have to do your active fund raising through voluntary efforts, not through the compulsion of the tax collector," AU Executive Director Barry Lynn said in the [Baltimore Sun](#).

Keeler, in [Catholic News Service](#), said the cathedral is important not only as the mother church of Catholics in the United States and for its architecture but also as a symbol of religious liberty. "The first place in the English-speaking world that had religious freedom by law was Maryland," he said.

While the [Toleration Act](#) adopted by the colony in 1649 granted greater protection than Catholics and other minority Christian groups had elsewhere, it fell well short of religious liberty in today's sense of the term.

Cecilius Calvert, the second Lord Baltimore, received a charter from King Charles I in 1632 for a colony to be an asylum for Roman Catholics from England, who were regarded heretics by Puritans in New England and Anglicans in Virginia. Protestants flooded in, however, and soon outnumbered Catholics, forcing Calvert to pass an act on April 24, 1649, protecting his fellow Catholics by requiring that

no person “[professing to believe in Jesus Christ](#)” be troubled or molested in his religion.

The toleration law excluded Jews, Muslims and other unbelievers, however, levying fines for breaking the Sabbath, prison and whipping for uttering “reproachful words or speeches concerning the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Our Savior” and death for blasphemy or denying the divinity of Christ or the Trinity.

While the Toleration Act sounds harsh by today’s standards, [historians say](#) it offered more freedom for Maryland citizens than those of England and most of the colonies and was an important step toward religious freedom.

But more than a dozen years before the Toleration Act, Roger Williams established a colony in today’s Rhode Island that provided not only toleration, but complete religious freedom for all.

“It is the will and command of God that, since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God’s Spirit, the word of God,” Williams wrote in his famous treatise, [The Bloudy Tenant of Persecution](#), penned in 1644, five years before the Maryland law.

Williams, a Puritan who left England in the 1630s to escape repression by the king and the Church of England, differed with founders of the Massachusetts Bay Colony with his view of “soul liberty,” that civil authorities should not intervene in matters of religion, and for complete separation of church and state.

Authorities in 1635 convicted Williams of sedition, heresy and refusing to swear an oath of allegiance in God’s name (he considered it blasphemous to use God’s name in a civil proceeding) and banished him to England. He instead fled in February 1636, spending the winter with Indians before establishing a settlement

named "Providence" as a "shelter for persons distressed of conscience."

Williams came to view believer's baptism as the only valid form, and in 1638 had himself and his congregation, who had all been baptized as infants, rebaptized, thus establishing the first Baptist church in America.

Williams' founding principles were so important that subsequent settlers adopted them, making Rhode Island the only colony without an established church.

The Baltimore basilica isn't the only house of worship seeking federal restoration funds. The Bush administration recently reversed earlier policy not allowing the restoration funds to be used for religious sites.

The administration announced in May the Old North Foundation of Boston was receiving a \$317,000 Save America's Treasures Grant to renovate sanctuary windows in that city's historic Old North Church. The church, which dates from 1723, is most famous for its role in Paul Revere's ride prior to the battles of Lexington and Concord on the night of April 18, 1775.

Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, home church to civil-rights pioneer Martin Luther King Jr., is getting \$620,000 from the program.

The architecturally important Monumental Church in Richmond, Va., designed by famed architect Robert Mills, has been granted \$319,000 to halt general deterioration and restore the building built in 1812.

Administration officials say all are national treasures, and it is discrimination to refuse funding because of their religious nature.

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