



Worship Pack

200th Anniversary of the Unitarian Toleration Act, 1813

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on behalf of the Facilitation Services Action Group,
Local Leadership Strategy Group**

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General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches

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Introductory Note

July 2013 marks the 200th Anniversary of the passing of the Unitarian Toleration Act, also known as the Unitarian Relief Act or the Trinity Act; a significant event in the history of British Unitarianism and Free Christianity. As we mark our freedom it is timely to consider the freedom of others. The freedom we now take for granted does not exist for millions of people in many parts of the world. Let us use our Anniversary as a springboard to practical action to promote “civil and religious freedom the world over”.

Derek McAuley

Call to Worship and Chalice Lighting

Martin Luther King once said, “The hope of the world is still in dedicated minorities. The trailblazers in human, academic, scientific and religious freedom have always been in the minority.”

As we gather to worship today
May it be as such a minority,
Dedicated to the cause of freedom
For all the people of the world

Rev Cliff Reed

See also Words for Chalice Lighting No 237 by Richard Boeke in “Sing Your Faith”

Hymns for use during the Service

Hymns for Living No 133 How Can I keep from Singing
Hymns for Living No 135 Sing in Celebration
Hymns for Living No 143 Die Gedanken Sind Frei
Hymns of Faith and Freedom No 238 To us have distant ages
Sing Your Faith No 30 Each seeking faith is seeking light
Sing Your Faith No 167 There is a place I call my own

Prayers

You may also wish to use the following words in a prayer or reflection or as a short reading:
“We believe in the doctrine of God’s unity, or that there is one God, and one only ... We believe in the moral perfection of God ... We cannot bow before a being, however, great and powerful, who rules tyrannically ... We believe God is infinitely good ... not to a few, but to all: good to every individual.”

William Ellery Channing, in “Unitarian Christianity”

We are met together before God gratefully to commemorate the faith and witness of those who went before us in their devotion to civil and religious liberty. We remember their historic witness to our tradition of freedom and tolerance and recall their labours, not counting the cost, to establish the principles that we now take for granted.

We honour those who in past times have given their lives or did not flinch from sacrifice or suffering, for the sake of freedom of belief and of worship.

We mark, with gratitude, the courage of those who, facing persecution, endeavoured to fashion our religious heritage and bring together our community of the free. At this special time of anniversary we remember in particular the achievements of William Smith MP 200 years ago.

We acknowledge that civil and religious liberty is not universal and pledge ourselves to work for religious freedom the world over.

Derek McAuley

Children's Story

Story 6. The Blind People and the Elephant by Bill Darlison in "The Shortest Distance" (pages 10/11) can usefully be used

Meditation/Prayer

From "With Heart and Mind 2"

Doer of things seen and unseen,
Remind us today that there will always
Be more questions than answers.
Give us the will to grow and develop
Through both questions and answers

(short silence)

Help us to be quiet within ourselves
To silence the din of the outside world
So that we may dwell safely in our rest.

(short silence)

Let both our doing and our resting be
The signs of our faith in an unseeing world

Rev Lewis Rees

Candle Lighting

You may wish to use a variation of Candles of Joys and Concerns by inviting anybody to light a candle and suggest a freedom or a tolerance for which they are particularly grateful, or light a candle for some country, situation, event where freedom of conscience is strained or denied.

Reading

A reading from “With Heart and Mind” by Rev Eric Jones:

“It was the summer of 1963. Two of us set out along muddy lanes and the wet marshland on the mountainside high above the Aberdare and Merthyr Tydfil valleys. We were looking for a pile of stones which denoted the exact spot of the old Cwmyglo Farmhouse (Valley of Coal) and the remains of a barn which acted as the Dissenters’ Meeting House. Up to forty people gathered for worship here in the sixteen-fifties, daring to defy the law of the land in order to be able to worship with freedom in a country where religious freedom and tolerance were not allowed.

They met at the barn of Cwmyglo farmhouse, cleared the hay and straw before worship could begin, stood for the whole service, whilst their leaders kept watch on nearly vantage points in case the “hand of the law” came too close. The ruins are still there, the remains of the farmhouse and barn with untrimmed stones emerging from the undergrowth. Tom Lewis of Cefncoed wrote a history of the early Dissenters of the area in 1947 and he describes the spot as, “a dingle of sylvan beauty, screened by a profusion of dense copses and tall, overhanging trees where, tradition states, the nightingale sang.”

There was certainly a magic about the place and the magic has remained with me ever since – the peace and tranquillity high above two industrial valleys, where people gathered and dared to be different. From the early pioneers at Cwmyglo, several places of worship of different traditions have emerged; including the Unitarian churches in both the Aberdare and Merthyr Valleys.

I often wonder if we continue to appreciate the sacrifice of those pioneers and embrace the vision of those early Dissenters. We may be in danger of forgetting about their determination and courage, letting go an integral part of our heritage”.

Rev Eric Jones

Material for Service Address

The Legislation

On 21 July 1813, a Statute (53 geo. 3. cap 160) was passed with the title: “An Act to relieve persons who impugn the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity from certain Penalties”. This could be used as a reading.

“Whereas in the 19th year of His present Majesty an Act was passed intituled “An Act for the further Relief of Protestant Dissenting Ministers and Schoolmasters”; and it is expedient to enact as hereinafter provided: be it ... enacted ... That so much of an Act passed in the 1st year of King William and Queen Mary, intituled An Act for exempting His Majesty’s Protestant Subjects dissenting from the Church of England, from penalties of certain Laws, as provides that Act or anything therein contained should not extend or be construed to extend to give any Ease, benefit or Advantage to Persons denying the Trinity as therein mentioned, be and the same is hereby repealed.

2. That the provisions of another Act passed in the 9th and 10th years of the Reign of King William intituled “An Act for the more effectual suppressing Blasphemy and Profaneness” so far as the same relate to Persons denying as therein mentioned, respecting the Holy Trinity, be and the same are hereby repealed.

3. And whereas it is expedient to repeal an Act, passed in the Parliament of Scotland in the First Parliament of King Charles the Second, intituled “An Act against the Crime of Blasphemy”; and another Act, passed in the Parliament of Scotland in the First Parliament of King William intituled “An Act against Blasphemy”; which Acts respectively ordain the Punishment of Death; Be it therefore enacted, That the said Acts and each of them shall be, and the same are and is hereby repealed”.

Note

Intitule - Law / Parliamentary Procedure) (tr) Parliamentary procedure (in Britain) to entitle (an Act) [from Old French *intituler*, from Latin *titulus* title]
Collins English Dictionary – Complete and Unabridged © HarperCollins Publishers 2003

Background and Impact

The Toleration Act of 1689, as amended by the Act “for the further relief of protestant dissenting ministers and schoolmasters” in 1779, provided for considerable relief from statutory penalties and disabilities. This relief was not extended to Unitarians because by section 17 of the Toleration Act of 1689 it was provided that “neither this act, nor any clause, article, or thing herein contained, shall extend or be construed to extend to any ease, benefit or advantage to....any person that shall deny in his preaching or writing the doctrine of the blessed Trinity as it is declared in the [39] articles of religion”.

Unitarians were not given the benefits of the Toleration Act of 1689 and of the Act of 1779 until 1813.

The Blasphemy Act, 1698, repealed in 1813 as it referred to Unitarian opinions states:

“Whereas many persons have of late years openly avowed and published many blasphemous and impious opinions, contrary to the doctrines and principles of Christian religion, greatly tending to the dishonour of Almighty God and may prove destructive to the peace and welfare of this Kingdom,” it is enacted that “if any person ...having been educated in, or at any time having made profession of the Christian religion within this realm, shall by writing, printing, teaching or advised speaking, deny, any of the persons in the Holy Trinity to be God, or shall

assert and maintain there are more gods than one, or shall deny the Christian religion to be true or the holy scriptures of the old and new testament to be of divine authority” and is convicted thereof he is disabled in law from having or enjoying “any office, ...employment ... ecclesiastical, civil or military” with further disabilities if a second time convicted. These included;

- Imprisonment for the space of three years,
- being unable to sue, prosecute, plead or use any action or information in any court of law,
- to be the guardian or any child or executor or administrator of any person, or capable of any legacy or deed of gift

The 1813 Act, it seems as a result of the haste in which it was passed, did not repeal the clauses in the Blasphemy acts affecting Ireland. It also left blasphemy as a crime under the Common Law. This law was not ultimately repealed until 2008 in the Criminal Justice and Immigration Act.

As Richard W. Davis states “Except in Ireland, Unitarianism was now legal in the United Kingdom. The name could be used with impunity, which was probably the bill’s most important practical effect.”

Immediate Response of Unitarians

A Special General Meeting of the Subscribers to the Unitarian Fund was held on 20 August 1813 at the Kings Head Tavern in the Poultry, City of London, and resolved:

“That we conceive it to be the right of every man – a right derived immediately from the Almighty Creator – to form his own religious opinions, to profess them amongst his neighbours and fellow-creatures, and to act upon them in the exercise of divine worship; - that in religious opinion, profession, and worship, as held, avowed and observed in Great Britain, there is no interruption of the peace of civil society, and no call for the interference of the magistrate, who cannot affect to Tolerate without assuming authority to Persecute; and that all penal statutes, whether they enact fine or imprisonment, or positive bodily suffering, or whether they declare civil disabilities, exclusion and privation, on the ground solely of such opinion, profession and worship, are invasions of natural right, and equally repugnant to the Christian Religion, and to the spirit of the British Constitution”.

That as Unitarian Christianswe had long felt the injustice of being excluded by positive statute from even that share of religious liberty which was allowed for the mass of Protestant Dissenters; - for which exclusion we humbly conceive no reason was to be found in our character and conduct as citizens, wherein we have never yielded, and can never yield, the superiority of any denomination or class of our countryman.

That in common with all the friends of religious liberty and just government, we rejoice that persecuting laws, enacted at the era of the Revolution, in direct violation of the principles then asserted, and which, though too cruel and impolitic to be often enforced, have remained for a century the disgrace of the statute book, are at length expunged....

That we trust the period is advancing, and would willingly hasten its arrival, when not only Christians of every description, but also our countrymen at large, shall be alike free to profess and defend their opinions, and all equally partake the civil rights of Britons.”

A Special General Meeting of the Unitarian Society for promoting Christian Knowledge and the Practice of Virtue, by the Distribution of Books, was convened at the Chapel in Essex Street on 30 July 1813 chaired by Rev Thomas Belsham.

Having expressed their great satisfaction with the passage of the Act and offered their thanks to Parliament they resolved:

“That this Society hail the present measure as an auspicious prelude to that happy day, when all penal laws and political restrictions on religious grounds shall be for ever abolished; when an invidious and limited Toleration shall give way to UNIVERSAL RELIGIOUS LIBERTY; and when all, without distinction, shall be entitled by law to the possession of those civil and political privileges which are the birthright of Britons.”

William Smith MP

The significance of the part played by William Smith MP to the passage of the Act cannot be under-estimated and is recognised in the resolutions passed by the above bodies and others at the time. Indeed it was popularly known as “Mr William Smith’s Bill”. As his biographer, Richard W. Davis plainly states “It was his own, and to him goes all the credit”.

“He approached the question with all his considerable political astuteness ... He was a patient negotiator, and he had laid his foundations firmly. Opposition had been scotched before it had arisen”. This included meetings with the Archbishop of Canterbury and getting his consent to change. “Having secured his flank, Smith next approached government. Armed with the acquiescence of the Church, his task here was not difficult. The government was more than willing that he should proceed He then had another interview with the Archbishop and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, when, together they moulded the bill into the final shape in which it passed the House of Commons ... Nothing that could be done to smooth its passage was left undone”. Initial opposition in the House of Lords led to the bill being withdrawn and a new one immediately introduced which passed quickly through both Houses of Parliament.

William Smith is now remembered primarily as the grandfather of Florence Nightingale. In his day he was, however, the leading Dissenter in parliamentary life. He was for forty years, Chairman to the Deputies of the three Denominations (Independents, Presbyterians and Baptist); the body that represented the Dissenting interests. He was born in 1756 in London and entered Parliament for Sudbury in 1784. He sat in the House of Commons for 46 years, (18 for Sudbury and 28 for Norwich) and always stood for reform.

He worked closely with Wilberforce for the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery. He campaigned for the repeal of the Corporate and Test Acts (achieved finally in 1828) and other disabilities affecting Dissenters. He supported Catholic Emancipation. He advocated reform in the representation of the people which eventually led to reforms of 1830s. He opposed the

French Revolutionary War and all interference in the internal affairs or government of foreign nations – a very unpopular stance. As his obituary in the “Christian Reformer” (1835) states:

“These were times of no small personal danger to any man of any note who dared to profess liberal opinions; but Mr Smith never hesitated or faltered; he confessed his creed, he steadily and fearlessly pursued his courses, and was prepared for all the consequences.”

Address by Rev Maud Robinson at the Time for Reflection in the Scottish Parliament on 19 March 2013

In years gone by, confessing a Unitarian faith could lead one to a sticky end. In 1697, Thomas Aikenhead, a young Edinburgh medical student, rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and for this offence was hanged. It wasn't until 1813 that the Unitarian Relief Act granted toleration for Unitarian worship. This year marks the 200th anniversary of that Act of toleration.

With our history of being denied tolerance, there has been a strong strand of Unitarian faith and practice which has always championed toleration of difference, and so I commend to you some thoughts about tolerance.

Words evolve and change but they often continue to carry nuances from the past, this is why it's important to think deeply about the particular words we use. The root of the word tolerance carries, as one meaning, to experience or undergo as pain or hardship. Are these really the terms in which we wish to view our relationships with those who are different from us? Maybe it's time to look beyond the word tolerance. What word could we think of using in its place?

There's compassion, the central virtue of all of the world faiths. A worthy ideal to aspire to, but does it cover the same ground as tolerance? Is it so wide that the initial focus on relations with those who differ from us is lost? If we try to approach those of different beliefs with compassion we may treat them with kindness as fellow-human beings, but does it challenge us to truly engage with them, in relation to their differing beliefs and worldview?

What about acceptance? It certainly doesn't carry the grudging connotations of tolerance but it can imply an uncritical wholesale embrace of everything said or done in the name of another cultural or faith tradition. As thinking people, we cannot accept actions which emanate from a different world view if they are harmful to others. This can be a difficult line to walk, but blind acceptance is not the answer.

Finally I suggest respect. Respect means to value others. Tolerance avoids engagement; respect welcomes it. This vision of moving beyond tolerance toward respect and active engagement with difference seems a better aspiration. Respect speaks more of thoughtful consideration; it's more generous than the implications of doing something grudgingly, which can be understood by tolerance; but it is more thoughtful and constructively critical than careless acceptance.

If each one of us could strive to treat those who are different to us with respect, I think we might indeed find ourselves living in a better world.

Religious Freedom Today

“Religious freedom and religious persecution affect all religious groups. Some – Baha’is in Iran, Ahmadis in Pakistan, Buddhists in China-Tibet, Falun Gong in China, Christians in Saudi Arabia – are now among the most intensely persecuted, but there is no group in the world that does not suffer to some degree because of its beliefs. Atheists and agnostics can also suffer from religious persecution. In Indonesia it is in principle illegal to be an atheist, although this provision is not enforced; but any Saudi Arabian – all of whom must, by law, be Muslim – who pronounces himself an atheist faces a real risk of being executed for apostasy. Religions, whether large, such as Christianity, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, or small, such as Baha’i, Jehovah’s Witness, or Judaism, all suffer to some degree. The most egregious persecuting states tend to be either communist, such as North Korea and China; nationalist, such as Burma/Myanmar and Eritrea; or radical Islamists, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. In some cases, restrictions on religion come from people who are members of the same general religious group but who are part of a different subgroup. Thus non-Orthodox Christians in Russia, Greece and Armenia suffer discrimination from the Orthodox, while Shiite Muslims in Pakistan and Saudi Arabia suffer persecution and even death at the hands of some of the dominant Sunni groups”.

“...violations of religious freedom worldwide are massive, widespread, and, in many parts of the world, intensifying.”

Paul Marshall (2008)

The Amnesty International website usefully shows its work on religious freedom:
www.amnesty.org/en

What can we do?

One practical action is to support the International Association for Religious Freedom, established over 100 years ago by Unitarians and Free Christians and other religious liberals.

IARF works on five practical programme areas; supporting affected communities: identifying communities that have recently suffered from the denial of religious freedom, raising concerns about religious persecution, developing a young adult programme, working with member organisations to develop voluntary guidelines for responsible religious practice, and preventive strategies to identify vulnerable areas before acts of religious intolerance recur, or occur, and developing programmes focused on prevention, including an emphasis on the role of education. For further information see <http://iarf.net/>

The IARF British Chapter is active and can be contacted via Rev Richard Boeke (Email: r.boeke@virgin.net)

Closing Blessing

We stand on the shoulders of giants; of the Unitarian and Free Christian men and women who gave selflessly for the principles we still hold dear. Let us be worthy heirs to our proud tradition of freedom, reason and tolerance. Go in peace.

Derek McAuley

Appendix

Extracts may be taken from this appendix and perhaps shared amongst a number of congregational members to provide a reading - or with music a meditation.

Article 18 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief:

The United Nations General Assembly in 1981 proclaimed the Declaration on the Elimination of All Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination Based on Religion or Belief:

Article 1

1. Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have a religion or whatever belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching.
2. No one shall be subject to coercion which would impair his freedom to have a religion or belief of his choice.
3. Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.

Article 2

1. No one shall be subject to discrimination by any State, institution, group of persons, or person on grounds of religion or other beliefs.
2. For the purposes of the present Declaration, the expression "intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief" means any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on religion or belief and having as its purpose or as its effect nullification or impairment of the recognition, enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms on an equal basis.

Articles 3 to 8 are to be found at
www.un.org/documents/ga/res/36/a36r055.htm

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Thanks

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