

## **Law breakers no more! 210<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Unitarian Relief Act**

**Opening Music:** Beethoven String Quartet Op. 18 no.2 in G major  
(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LcxgJxikvqk> )

**Welcome:** Good morning & welcome everyone, whether you are here in person, joining us on Zoom (wave) or watching online later. You are all welcome, whether you are a regular attender, or a new-comer. Whatever you bring in your heart: whether you come in sadness, or joy or out of curiosity, whatever your faith or none, you are welcome! We start as usual by lighting our chalice flame as a symbol of our free religious faith, and if you are at home and have a candle, you may like to light it now.

### **Chalice Lighting:**

We kindle the sacred fire  
as we gather in community,  
mindful of the brave souls and  
questing, independent minds  
whose courage won our freedom.

*Rev Cliff Reed*

### **Light Chalice here**

**Opening Words** Martin Luther King once said, “The hope of the world is still in dedicated minorities. The trailblazers in human, academic, scientific & 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

*Some opening words, based on those originally written by Derek McAuley, former Chief Executive officer of Unitarians in UK, for the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Trinity Act in 2013*  
“This month sees the 210<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the passing of the Unitarian Toleration Act, also known as the Unitarian Relief Act or the Trinity Act. This was a significant event in the history of British Unitarianism and Free Christianity. As we mark our freedom of worship here in the UK it is timely to consider the freedom of others elsewhere. The freedom of religious belief and practice 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”.

**1<sup>st</sup> Hymn:** P 158 ‘The Flame of Truth is kindled’

### **Prayers: Let us turn to a time of prayer and reflection:**

We meet together gratefully in the presence of the God of our understanding, 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 we remember especially the achievements of William Smith MP, two centuries ago.

We acknowledge that civil and religious liberty is not universal and pledge ourselves to work for religious freedom the world over. *Derek McAuley, former Chief Exec UFCC*

**A Prayer of Invocation** *(Adapted from a liturgy based on resources prepared by women)*

Spirit of loving tenderness, touch us and be touched by us.

Help us to become true lovers of humanity and compassionate friends of all creation.

Pardon in us, we pray, our lack of tenderness.

Heal in us the injuries we inflict and the injuries we suffer.

Hear us into speech, speak us into action, use us for your creating work.

Make of us a place where your touch reaches out in grace to others, for you are the source of all love in our lives,.. *AMEN*

**1<sup>st</sup> Reading/story:** 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 (coom- why- glow) 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 nearby 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".

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading:** **These words were at the heart of *The Legislation passed in 1813:***

*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".*

*"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 School-masters"; and it is expedient to enact as hereinafter provided: be it ... enacted ... That so much of an*

*Act passed in the 1<sup>st</sup> 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.*

*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.*

*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".*

**2<sup>nd</sup> Hymn:** P. 30 'Each seeking faith'

**2<sup>nd</sup> Prayer:** adapted from one by Vincent B. Silliman 'RELIGION'

"May religion be to us life and joy, a voice of renewing challenge to the best we have and may be; let it be a call to generous action.

Let religion be to us a dissatisfaction with things that are, which bids us serve more eagerly the true and right. Let it be the sorrow that opens for us the way of sympathy, understanding, and service to suffering humanity.

Let religion be to us the wonder and lure of that which is only partly known and understood: An eye that glories in nature's majesty and beauty, and a heart that rejoices in deeds of kindness and of courage.

Let religion be to us security and serenity because of its truth and beauty, and because of the enduring worth and power of the loyalties it engenders; Let it be to us hope and purpose, and a discovering of opportunities to express our best through daily tasks:

Religion, uniting us with all that is admirable in human beings everywhere;

Holding before our eyes a prospect of the better life for humankind, which each may help to make actual... *AMEN*"

**Meditation:** words by Rev Cliff Reed written for the meeting of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists, in 2002

We are the Christians who move on,  
Leaving behind what cannot be retained –

The creeds written to cement a long dead empire;  
The justification for slavery, genocide and witch burning;  
The refusal to hear other people's truths;  
An idolized book;  
A man diminished to a god.

We leave these behind and move on-

Not in arrogance,  
Not unaware of tradition's worth,  
Not creating new bigotries as bad as the old ones.  
Or so we hope !

We move on –

Carrying with us the free and timeless heart of Jesus,  
Faithful to what was said and done in love for liberty  
By him, by those who follow him,  
By those who give his spirit voice and flesh  
In every time and place.

We are the Christians who move on –

Leaving even the name behind, maybe,  
A name that Jesus never knew.

We are the Christians who move on –

Seeking and sharing the divine heart in everyone,  
As Jesus did.

**Approx. 1 ½ min silence:**

**Music:**

Mozart: Andante in C major K315: Emmanuel Pahud & Munchner Rundfunkorchester  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-6WSGX5aMg>

### **ADDRESS – ‘Law Breakers no More’**

We live in troubled times, I don't think anyone would disagree with that. Despite what some merchants of doom say about the current state of affairs in this country, really, we are lucky, to be living at *this time*, in *this* country, where we can worship as *our consciences* dictate, and not as any authority commands. Our recently crowned King included representatives of the major faith groups at his Coronation, and when he was given the Jewels of Scotland recently.

It was not always so. If the King's men of 400 or 500 years ago had caught us saying some of the prayers we used earlier, or singing the words of those hymns, or listening to Cliff Reed's reflective piece on being "the Christians who move on" we would have been in serious trouble, indeed, at some times in the past, our very lives would have been in peril.

Why?

We would have been breaking the Law!

We would have been breaking the Law?

How? Surely not just by joining in with those prayers and hymns?

Well, yes, actually.

There is a long and dark history in this country of people being persecuted for daring to hold different religious beliefs from the mainstream. As far back as the reign of Henry 5<sup>th</sup>, that golden boy who won at Agincourt in the early 1400's, the Lollards, who challenged orthodox religious views, and questioned the authority of the Pope, were imprisoned and several sadly burnt as heretics.

We move on to Tudor times. What we now call the English Reformation involved enormous changes in the political and religious life of this country. The religious beliefs of succeeding monarchs differed widely. From the Protestant Edward 6<sup>th</sup>, to the very Catholic Mary, and then the protestant Elizabeth 1<sup>st</sup>, who tried to steer a more middle way.

Anyone who didn't change their own beliefs in accordance, risked being labelled a 'heretic' and cruelly persecuted. Many men and women lost their lives, in the most horrible way, at the stake.

The last people to be burnt in England as heretics were Bartholomew Legate and Edward Wightman in March and April 1612 respectively, in the reign of James I of England. They rejected many of the accepted religious beliefs, including the concept of the Trinity of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Legate and Wightman were victims of a complex series of events, including a growing campaign against puritans and King James' desire to be seen as a traditional Christian.

The King soon realised that the general population were against such horrible public persecution, so contented himself with 'only' throwing such 'dissenters' into prison, where they languished for the rest of their lives. Some years later, the pilgrim fathers in 1620, set sail, lastly, from this place, to go to America, where they could practice their religion in their own way, without fear of persecution. In Scotland, as late as 1697, Thomas Aikenhead, a young Edinburgh medical student, rejected the doctrine of the Trinity for which he was hanged.

During the English Civil War, John Biddle, known as the father of English Unitarianism, was imprisoned for what could be described as 'Dissenting' behaviour, in his writings. His writings were burned; he was not. Oliver Cromwell exiled Biddle to the Scilly Isles, where you'd think he might be safe, but his story does not have a happy ending, as you will hear shortly.

In 1660, King Charles II returned from exile and restored the monarchy. Everyone hoped this heralded a new more liberal age, but within 2 years, the promise of the Restoration was already turning sour.

The Act of Uniformity, of 1662 was an Act of Parliament, requiring the use of all the rites and ceremonies in the Book of Common Prayer. All ministers of religion had to be ordained by recognised bishops, and were required to conform to the 39 Articles of Religion, finalized in the reign of the first Elizabeth. I had a look through

them whilst preparing this Service, and they cover a wide range of things which they were supposed to do and not do.

Many of the Clergy felt unable to conform to all of them. As a result, nearly 2,000 clergymen, including George Hughes, the puritan vicar of St Andrews in Plymouth, were forced to leave the established church in what became known as the Great Ejection. 1662: and if you ever visit our church in Cullompton, you'll see that date on the gates there. Any 'non-conforming' Minister, preferring to follow the dictates of his own conscience, was forced from office. The Act was implemented within 2 months, on St Bartholemew's Day, 24 August 1662. This was a significant date: it

meant any minister who did not conform would not be paid his stipend due in September, and having lost his living, left with no means income, for being brave enough to not agree to do certain things he'd been told he should.

All ecclesiastical people, curates, teachers, schoolmasters, professors were required to take a further stringent oath. All non-conformists were excluded from holding civil or military office, from receiving legacies, from adopting children. They were also prevented from being awarded degrees by the universities of Oxford and Cambridge.

And what of John Biddle? We thought he was safe in the Scilly Isles? He returned to London, was again arrested at the time of the 1662 Act, and fined £100 – a very great sum in those days. He was unable to pay, and was thrown into prison, where he died of fever a few months later.

Time passed. Eventually attitudes softened towards several branches of Protestant Non-conformity; maybe they were no longer perceived as a threat. Unitarians began meeting for worship towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, though often in out of the way places, as described in piece by Rev Eric Jones.

In 1689, a Toleration Act was passed, and amended in 1779 "for the further relief of Protestant Dissenting ministers and schoolmasters". It gave them considerable relief from statutory penalties and disabilities. This relief, however, was not extended to Unitarians. The Act stated 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*".

So, the Unitarians who met in Essex Street in 1774 to hear Theophilus Lindsey preach, were breaking the Law. So was Joseph Priestly, the scientist and Unitarian preacher. He eventually emigrated to America in 1794 after a mob destroyed the chapel where he was Minister, and his own home and laboratory in July 1791. July seems to be a very significant month, doesn't it!

Also regarded as lawbreakers were members of the congregation at the Devonport Unitarian chapel built in 1790. Many worked in the naval Dockyard but as records state, '*The Congregation of the Chapel decayed in consequence of its being understood that Commissioner Fanshaw intimated that all Dockyardsmen who attended the New Chapel would be discharged as disloyal subjects*' ie they would lose their jobs. And the persecutions continued.

The chapel is now a Co-Operative store near Stonehouse, if anyone wishes to see it. The original building is beautifully preserved.

Unitarians were not given the benefits of the Toleration Act of 1689 and of the Act of 1779 until 1813. Earlier we heard words from the Act of Toleration of 1813. Basically, it repealed certain parts of the earlier acts, removing the risk of prosecution and even death, for anyone who dared being a Unitarian. So it was, that

in 1813, William Smith MP approached this with all his considerable political astuteness ... Nowadays William Smith is remembered primarily as the grandfather of Florence Nightingale, but he was the leading Dissenter in Parliament. For 40 years, he was Chairman to the Deputies of the three Denominations (Independents, Presbyterians and Baptist); the body that represented the Dissenting interests. Smith entered Parliament in 1784 and sat in the House of Commons for 46 years, and always worked for reform.

He had worked closely with Wilberforce for the abolition of slavery. He supported Catholic Emancipation, for they too were denied many of the rights which Anglicans enjoyed. He opposed the French Revolutionary War and all interference in the internal affairs or government of foreign nations – a very unpopular stance. Now he campaigned for an Act to give equal rights to Unitarians.

He was a patient negotiator, and laid his foundations firmly. He scotched any objections to his proposed Bill by obtaining the consent for change from Archbishop of Canterbury, Charles Manners-Sutton. Smith next approached the government, which was more than willing for him to proceed .... He then had another interview with the Archbishop and the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and 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". The Bill was withdrawn when House of Lords initially opposed it, but another was introduced immediately. 'The Unitarian Toleration Act', also known as the 'Unitarian Relief Act' or the 'Trinity Act' was passed by Parliament on 21 July 1813, a Statute with the title: "An Act to relieve persons who impugn the Doctrine of the Holy Trinity from certain Penalties".

The 1813 Act, however, probably due to 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. It was, though, a triumph for Unitarians. 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.*" It meant Unitarians could finally worship with no fear of persecution.

William Smith's part cannot be under-estimated and was recognised 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*".

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. Long speeches were made, concluding thus:

*“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.”*

At William’s death in 1835 his obituary in the “Christian Reformer” 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.”*

Thank you, William Smith! How many of us sitting here today, would have had his energy, commitment, perseverance and courage, to carry this out?

How many of us sitting here today, would have had the courage of those first non-conformists in 1662, to show publicly what our beliefs are?

How many of us sitting here today, would have had the courage of those earlier men, such as Edward Wightman or Bartholmew Legate, or the young student, Thomas Aikenhead, to show publicly what our beliefs are? I’m not sure I would!

But we are the lucky ones! Sadly even today, in some parts of the world, people do not enjoy these freedoms.

As *Paul Marshall wrote 15 years ago*, “There is no group in the world that does not suffer to some degree because of its beliefs: including: Baha’is in Iran, Ahmadis in Pakistan, Buddhists in China-Tibet, Falun Gong in China, Christians in Saudi Arabia, Muslim Rohingya fleeing violence in Myanmar. Atheists and agnostics and Jehovah’s Witnesses, can also suffer from religious persecution. In Indonesia it is in principle illegal to be an atheist; any Saudi Arabian must, by law, be a Muslim, whoever pronounces themselves an atheist faces a real risk of execution. ... violations of religious freedom worldwide are massive, widespread, and, in many parts of the world, intensifying.”

What can we do?

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



IARF works to support those who are suffering, or who may suffer, by being denied their religious freedom. It runs a young adult education programme. It works to prevent acts of religious intolerance before they happen.

In closing, I'll say that most importantly, is for each one of us to really value the religious freedom we enjoy today. It was won at such cost by those of previous generations. Its our privilege, and our right and our duty to keep it alive for those who come after us. To keep the light alive and to make it shine!

I'm going to invite you to join in our final hymn in a moment, but first to explain that our closing video is of a song many Unitarians enjoy. I can remember a group of children singing it at one of the GA's I attended some years ago. This one is by an American UU adult 'virtual' choir, probably recorded during lockdown. The words

appear beneath the singers, so if you feel like joining in, feel free! But firstly, lets sing our final hymn.

3<sup>rd</sup> Hymn 178 "Together now, we join as one"

2 min 28s

### **Closing Words:**

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. And may we all go in peace ..... *Amen.*

**Closing Video: of American UU's singing 'This little light '**

2min 48s

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pPMtVvsUpAA&t=30s>

*Acknowledgement:* Much of the worship material and some of the records of historical events were taken from the Unitarian Worship Pack produced in 2013, to mark the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the 1813 Trinity Act.