

Unitarians and Religious Freedom

thoughts expressed in my part of a joint worship service with Alastair Moodie on the Unitarian Toleration Act of 1813, held at Glasgow Unitarian Church on 13 October 2013

And now for something completely different - **nobody** expects the Spanish Inquisition!

With thanks to the Monty Python crew for that introductory phrase, I **will** be making reference to the Spanish Inquisition today, but only as part of my responses to the significant historical events which were the passing of the Unitarian Toleration Act of 1813 and that year's associated repeal of the Blasphemy Act of 1698 as it referred to Unitarian opinions (this Act was only **fully** repealed in 2008).

As a Unitarian, my responses are of course unlikely to be "completely different" from Alastair's responses, though I have been looking forward with interest to hearing his, and hope that you will all find something meaningful in both our responses.

I start with what I find a fascinating part of the Blasphemy Act of 1698 as it existed prior to 1813.

“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 **he is disabled in law from having or enjoying** “any office...employment ecclesiastical, civil or military” **with further disabilities if a second time convicted”**.

This Act provided a level of protection in law for Christianity not afforded to any other religion or belief, which is the primary relevance to me since this raises the thorny issues both of mixing church and state and of doing so in support of only one favoured religion, issues which I will talk about shortly.

Please note in particular however **whom** this law applied to -
“any person...having been educated in, or at any time having made profession of, the Christian religion within this realm”

This phraseology jumped out at me because of just how surprised I had been years ago when I first learned about a different, but similar, linking of Christianity and State Law, although in another country.

This was the discovery that the Spanish Inquisition, which I already knew to have been about the enforcement of Christian belief and practice and to have had legal authority, had actually had jurisdiction over all who had **at some time in their lives** claimed to be Christian and not only over currently practicing Christians.

I find it very relevant that this kind of authority of state law over former as well as current believers in the “preferred” state religion existed here in this country until so recently, and find both examples very relevant to the current day when, disappointingly in my view, many countries still apply similar practice, and often with significantly greater legal penalty.

I am pleased with the above-mentioned and other related changes in law here in the UK which have distanced church and state, grateful for the scope they have given to Unitarianism and to the enabling of religious freedom in this country, and very proud both of the fact that we Unitarians had been significant catalysts for such change and of our continued efforts both to support and to enable religious freedom.

In the Nineteenth Century, Unitarians were seen as “making a difference” by being at the evangelical cutting edge of three changes we should bring to how we view religion –

- **Freedom** - supporting every individual’s right to hold personal faith
- **Reason** - allowing reason a role within religion rather than relying solely on blind faith
- **Tolerance** - being respectful of others’ personal faith

I am pretty certain that it was as a direct consequence of this perceived “making a difference” that these were days when the Unitarian movement was rewarded with financial support and numerical growth.

I would now like to move on and focus on the possible roles of the Unitarian movement – perhaps best carried out in cooperation with other movements which also adopt an inclusive approach to religion, spirituality, and “being human” - in moving religious and spiritual freedom forward in the present and into the future.

Let’s start by thinking about what is meant by “religious freedom”, about what restrictions (if any) should be put upon it, and about what restrictions **are** regularly put upon it.

I think we have to start by identifying two related, but very different, aspects of such freedom. The first is the freedom to hold personal faith in all, or in parts of, particular religious, spiritual, or ethical worldviews, and the second is the freedom to act in accordance with this personal worldview.

I suggest that a modern way to rephrase Unitarian views on religious freedom is –

“we support both the right of all to hold personal faith as a basic human right but also see the responsibility of all to restrict their actions in accordance with such faith to those which fully respect the human rights of others”

Human beings find all sorts of things to fall out about, including religious and political beliefs, but a key problem occurs when religion is supported by the state. We have quite a good recent record here in the UK, but the Constitution of the United States of America faced the problem head-on, with a clear declaration that church and state **MUST** be kept separate.

They have had mixed success with this in practice – the church engages in extremely powerful lobbying – but it is in my view a necessity for the protection of religious freedom. Just compare America’s record on religious freedom with that of countries which do **NOT** have this.

I’ll spare you the gory details, but I am sure you all have pictures in your own heads of just some of the human rights abuses which arise from the enshrining of religious requirement within state law.

This is an area in which we can, and must, seek to make a difference.

The other key area in which we can make a difference is to build bridges between human beings by focussing on what we all **share** - our humanity, our spirituality and our sense of connectedness - whilst engaging positively with difference in how we view this.

It is surely absolutely correct for us each to be driven by our personal faiths and worldviews – indeed, what else can we do?

But it is so much better to do so with a positive engagement with difference, and with our actions in response to our personal faiths restricted by respect and compassion for others, for other life forms, for our planet, and for our universe(s).

I close with something current and close to home which I consider to be a significant step forward. This is the address made in March this year to the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood by Rev Maud Robinson, Unitarian Minister at St Marks in Edinburgh.

This, if taken up, will enable Scotland to set a wonderful example of religious and spiritual openness. It already reflects the reality that Unitarian thinking is back on the map up here, the invitation to address Parliament having been a direct result of Maud's involvement with the "equal marriage" campaign.

Here is what she said -

“In years gone by, confessing to a Unitarian faith could lead one to a sticky end. In 1697, Thomas Aitkenhead, 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. Our congregations nowadays comprise of people who identify as Christian, Buddhist, humanist, agnostic, and many others, 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 if all the world’s 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 world-view?

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 can avoid engagement, respect welcomes it. This vision of moving forward 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 engaged respect rather than with intolerance, with grudging tolerance, or with unthinking acceptance, then I think we might indeed find ourselves in a better world."

Barry Bell

I think that this addresses a significant part of what Unitarians and Unitarian communities have always been about, and agree entirely with these words of Rev Maud Robinson –

“This vision of moving forward beyond tolerance toward respect and active engagement with difference seems a better aspiration. If each one of us could strive to treat those who are different to us with engaged respect rather than with intolerance, with grudging tolerance, or with unthinking acceptance, then I think we might indeed find ourselves in a better world”.

Amen to that, I say.