

## “The Unitarian Presidents”

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Children's Focus:

Adlai E. Stevenson

The last Unitarian to run for President was Adlai Stevenson. Stevenson's grandfather was a Democrat and a Presbyterian, while his maternal grandfather was a Republican and a Unitarian. His parents brought him up in the “tolerant humanistic Unitarian faith” of his mother's family. He attended Sunday school in the Unitarian Church, where he recited these words: “In the love of truth, and in the spirit of Jesus, we unite for the worship of God and the service of man”.

As an adult Stevenson was a member of the Unitarian Church in Bloomington, Illinois. When he was running for the Presidency in 1952, he issued a statement of dual membership in both the Unitarian and the Presbyterian Churches, to make himself more acceptable among mainstream Christians. In 1960 Adlai Stevenson was the guest speaker at this church and someone saved the chair in which he sat. (Roger invited children to sit in the chair.)

Sermon:

John Adams

This morning, the Sunday before Presidents Day, I want to recall the Unitarians who have served as the leader of our nation. The first Unitarian President of the United States, John Adams, grew up attending First Parish Church in what is now Quincy, Massachusetts. His father wanted him to become a minister but while a student at Harvard, young John Adams noticed that members of the congregation in his church back home in Quincy were constantly criticizing the minister. They did not like his sermons. Describing the church fight, Adams said controversy “broke out like the Eruption of a Volcano and blazed with portentous aspect for many years.” The congregation held meetings to hear complaints about the minister's faults. When John Adams was eighteen, the church leadership called a congregational meeting to dismiss the minister of his church because of his Unitarian theology. After an intense discussion, a majority voted to retain the minister and in this way First Parish in Quincy became a Unitarian congregation. Watching this bitter controversy, Adams decided against the ministry, choosing instead to study law, which seemed a less controversial profession.

When George Washington declined to run for a third term in 1796, Adams became the second President of the United States and the first Unitarian to hold the office. Adams preferred Unitarian worship services, but while serving as President in Philadelphia he attended a Presbyterian church. During his four years in office people complained that he was reserved and austere, with a cool, aloof manner. They described Adams as a “dour New England Puritan” and the voters did not re-elect him in 1800.

Adams returned home, and he and Abigail donated money and land to build a new Unitarian Church in Quincy. Abigail died in 1818. John lived long enough to see their son John Quincy inaugurated President in 1825. He died on July 4th, 1826 and is buried next to Abigail in the crypt beneath First Parish Unitarian Church in Quincy, now a National Historic Landmark.

Today there is a revival in interest in the lives of John and Abigail Adams. Starting March 16, HBO will present a seven-part miniseries on the lives of these two Unitarians, two of the most important people in American history.

### Thomas Jefferson

In 1800 Thomas Jefferson ran for President against John Adams on the ticket of the newly created Democratic Party. During the campaign, some said that Jefferson was an atheist. A lady who was a member of the older Federalist Party was so terrified of what would happen to the family Bible if Jefferson became President that she took it to the only Jefferson supporter she was friends with and asked him to hide it for her.

“My good woman”, the friend said. “If Jefferson is going to destroy all Bibles when he is elected, what is the use of bringing yours to me? That will not save it when it is found.”

“I’m sure it will,” she insisted. “It will be perfectly safe with you. They’ll never think of looking in the house of a Democrat for a Bible.”

What was the religion of Thomas Jefferson? In outward form all his life he remained a member in good standing of his local Anglican church, which became Episcopal after the American Revolution. He and his family were baptized, married, and buried by the Episcopal Church.

Jefferson’s inward convictions were another matter. Jefferson seldom spoke about his personal religious beliefs because he believed that religion is a personal, private matter. He said to a biographer: “Say nothing of my religion. It is known to my God and myself alone.” Yet there are in existence personal papers, letters and other writings that shed light on the religious views of Thomas Jefferson.

While he never joined a Unitarian church, he once wrote in a letter: “The population of my neighbourhood is too slender, and is too much divided into other sects to maintain any one preacher well. I must therefore be contented with being a Unitarian by myself.” In 1822 he predicted incorrectly that “There is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian.” Because of these quotations many of us claim Jefferson as a Unitarian--although we are not happy that he was the only Unitarian President who owned slaves.

On July 4<sup>th</sup>, 1826, a few hours after John Adams died in Quincy, Jefferson died at Monticello. He was buried in an Episcopal service.

### John Quincy Adams

The third Unitarian President of the United States was John Quincy Adams. John and Abigail Adams took the boy John Quincy to the family’s First Parish Unitarian Church in Quincy, Massachusetts. Like his father, John Quincy did not have a warm personality. About himself he admitted: “I am a man of reserved, cold, austere, and forbidding manners.”

Nevertheless, the leaders of the new country highly respected him. In 1817 John Quincy came to Washington, D. C., to serve as Secretary of State. Here in 1821 he joined with twenty-six others to found All Souls Unitarian Church.

He was a conservative Christian Unitarian. For many years John Quincy was a member of the American Bible Society, and he served as one of the society’s vice presidents. The mission of the American Bible Society was to print and distribute Bibles. In 1830 he wrote: “The distribution of Bibles, if the simplest, is not the least efficacious of the means of extending the blessings of the Gospel to the remotest corners of the earth.”

In 1824 John Quincy ran for President, and served one term. Then he became a member of the United States Congress. Like his father, John Quincy Adams hated slavery. In his diary, he called it the “great and foul stain upon the country.” He spent his years in the House of Representatives fighting against slavery. In 1841, he represented Africans from the Spanish schooner Amistad before the Supreme Court. He successfully argued that the Africans, who had seized control of a Spanish ship, should not be taken to Cuba but should be considered free and have the option of remaining within the United States or return home as free people.

Here in Washington during warm weather Adams would rise at 5 a.m., walk to the Potomac River, take all his clothing off and go for a morning swim, making him the first skinny-dipping Unitarian President. An expert swimmer, at the age of fifty-eight he swam the width of the river, about a mile, in one hour. He took his last nude dip in the river at age seventy-nine.

While preparing to address the House of Representatives on February 21, 1848, Adams collapsed, and died two days later. The family took his body to Quincy and later put it in the crypt of the Unitarian Church. The Quincy Unitarian Church is the only place in the United States where two Presidents are buried side by side.

### Millard Fillmore

The fourth Unitarian President was Millard Fillmore. He was born in 1800 in a wilderness cabin in upper New York State. Although his father was a farmer, Millard was apprenticed to a lawyer and thus began his law and public career. He was admitted to the bar in 1823, married and moved to Buffalo in 1830. After he and his wife moved to Buffalo, they joined the First Unitarian Society.

He was elected to Congress in 1832 and elected Vice-President of the United States in 1848. While Fillmore was in Washington, D. C., he attended the Unitarian Church. Those were “Years of Struggle” for All Souls Unitarian Church in Washington. The church was misunderstood and misrepresented in the community, and at times political dissensions threatened its existence. But the families of John Quincy Adams and later Millard Fillmore during his Presidency stood together supporting the church. It was important to them and to those who were to come after that a Unitarian Church in the capital of the nation be maintained. (*A Century of Unitarianism in the National Capital*, Jennie Scudder)

Fillmore became President after the sudden and unexpected death of President Taylor in July 1850. He served for only two and a half years. Fillmore detested slavery. Nevertheless, he also feared a bloody civil war between the north and south. He ended the selling of slaves in the District of Columbia and had California admitted as a free state. However, he also supported the Fugitive Slave Act to appease the slave-holding states, while hoping that slavery would end peacefully.

For years I have joked that Millard Fillmore installed the White House’s first bathtub. I discovered in researching this sermon that this is a myth started by H. L. Mencken as a joke published in a newspaper in 1917. I do not know who installed the first bathtub but Fillmore, a bookworm, found the White House without books and initiated the White House library.

### William Howard Taft

William Howard Taft was the fifth and last Unitarian President, born into a Unitarian family in Cincinnati, Ohio. His parents, strong abolitionists, joined the Unitarian Church in the late 1840’s.

Taft studied law and graduated from Yale University and Cincinnati Law School, after which he practised law in Cincinnati. President Benjamin Harrison chose him as United States Solicitor General. In 1904 Taft's friend, Theodore Roosevelt, appointed him as Secretary of War. Roosevelt and Taft were close friends. The two men had lunch together nearly every day in the White House, and Taft played the role of supporting and reassuring President Roosevelt. As a result Roosevelt recommended Taft as his successor in the election of 1908. In Washington Taft was a member of All Souls Unitarian Church. When some criticized Taft's Unitarian beliefs during the 1908 campaign for President, Teddy Roosevelt supported his friend by attending the Unitarian Church with Taft. Roosevelt said that in his Cabinet he had a Catholic, a Protestant Christian and a Jew, each man chosen for his qualifications.

Taft served as the 27th President of the United States from 1909 to 1913. Taft was an honest man but not a skilled politician. He reacted to criticism by overeating and by taking five-week vacations at his summer home near Beverly, Massachusetts. He instructed that no mail be sent to him during his vacation. Even when Taft was not officially on vacation he liked to spend each afternoon playing golf on the Chevy Chase golf links, saying that exercise was required for his health and weight reduction. When he was not on vacation or playing golf Taft would sometimes sneak out of the White House and walk the streets of Washington. The White House staff would become frantic because no one knew what had become of the President. Greatly disappointed in his friend, Teddy Roosevelt ran against Taft in 1912, splitting the vote of the Republican Party so that Democrat Woodrow Wilson was elected.

After the Presidency, Taft taught law at Yale University and served as the moderator of the American Unitarian Association, the equivalent to being chairperson of the board of trustees of the denomination. In 1921 he became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, the only person in American history to serve both as President and as Chief Justice. Speaking to the children of the church school at All Souls in 1929, he said:

*When you come to the end of your life, the only comfort, the only real satisfaction you have is in the good you have done for others. Now...you will always have to have a decent respect for yourself. Nevertheless, it is your usefulness to your friends and to the community which is going to count most.*

After he died in March 1930, his family held a simple funeral service at All Souls Church and buried him in Arlington National Cemetery.

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So these are the five: Adams, Jefferson, Adams, Fillmore and Taft. In the history of the United States ten Presidents have been Episcopalian, ten Presidents have been Presbyterian, five have been Methodists and five have been Unitarian. We are the most overrepresented religious group among United States presidents! We are only .2% of the population, but 12% of all American Presidents have been Unitarian. A Catholic historian has said: "an impressive case can be made for the proposition that no religious denomination has and does provide a greater number of national figures than the Unitarian Universalists."

Although both Secretary of Defense William Perry and Secretary of Defense William Cohen identified themselves as Unitarian Universalists, it does seem unlikely at the moment that any candidate who identifies herself or himself as a Unitarian Universalist will have a chance to be elected President of the United States. Since the 1950s, when Stevenson ran as a Unitarian, our religious movement has gradually become less identified with Christianity, while the general assumption in the United States continues to be that a conventional, mainstream Christian should be elected President, more likely a Protestant than a Catholic. Obama is a member of the United Church of Christ. Clinton is a member of the United Methodist Church. McCain is identified in some biographies as an Episcopalian and in others as a Baptist. Mike Huckabee is a Baptist minister. Only one candidate is a Unitarian Universalist: Senator Mike Gravel joined the Anchorage

Unitarian Fellowship in the 1950s and has continued a relationship with Unitarian Universalism throughout his life. It does appear unlikely that he will receive the Democratic nomination given that his best showing so far was to receive 402 votes in the New Hampshire primary. Right now we are out of the mainstream. We are on the far left of liberal religion in the United States.

Still, cultures do mature and grow and change. I believe that our positions on issues such as gay marriage will one day become the conventional and mainstream views of most people in society, in the same way views shifted in the 1960s concerning the rights of African Americans. So perhaps someday we will have another Unitarian Universalist President. For example, perhaps someday we can celebrate the election of Rich Madaleno of our church as the sixth Unitarian President. Until that time, we can be proud of our heritage and of our members' contributions to the leadership of this nation.