

## Our Unitarian Presidents



### A Sermon

By Jim Caldiero, June 30, 2024, Channing Memorial Church (UU)

“THESE are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated.” So advised Thomas Paine in his pamphlet, *American Crisis* in 1776.

Now, nearly 250 years later, as we approach our presidential election in November, we are perhaps facing another American crisis.

I have come to accept Henry Adams’ observation that “The progress of evolution from President Washington to President Grant, was alone evidence enough to upset Darwin.” This coming election may confirm that Adams was right.

If only a UU were president. Surprisingly, we can rightly assert that at the presidential level, Unitarians, historically, are the most influential people in the halls of power, having put five presidents in the White House. No other religion of its size has had more of its adherents reside at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Sixty-nine million Roman Catholics have elected two; 33 million Baptists and seven million Methodists, each only elected four. With only 148,000 members, UU's can claim five presidents (Jefferson included), the smallest ratio among all presidential denominations.

Of course, wishing that a UU was president, might not have been a good idea during the mid-nineteenth century. Born in 1800 to a hardscrabble tenant farmer in western New York, Millard Fillmore, after reading law with a local judge, was admitted in 1823 to the bar in Buffalo. Raised nominally as a Methodist, he became a Unitarian in 1831 and was a founding member of the Unitarian Church in Buffalo. As a Unitarian, Fillmore strongly supported the separation of church and state, working in the 1830's to overturn a law that required all witnesses in New York

courts to swear an oath affirming their belief in God and the hereafter. Debating his political rival William H. Seward about the use of public money to support Catholic schools, Fillmore argued that no sectarian institution should be supported by taxes. "In my opinion," he said subsequently in an 1856 campaign speech, "I am tolerant of all creeds. Yet if any sect suffered itself to be used for political objects, I would meet it by political opposition. In my view church and state should be separate, not only in form but fact. Religion and politics," he concluded, "should not be mingled."

Entering local politics in 1828, he served four terms as a U.S. congressman, was elected vice president in 1848 and reached the presidency upon the death of Zachary Taylor. As a more receptive and decisive Chief Executive than Taylor, Fillmore enabled the enactment of Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850 and forestalled the inevitable bloody clash a decade later. Although in his annual message in December Fillmore hailed the compromise measures as a final settlement of the sectional controversy, as I noted in a previous sermon about the

radicalization of the Rev. Theodore Parker, the most unpalatable piece of the Compromise was the Fugitive Slave Law, which saw Unitarian abolitionists such as Parker, the Rev. Thomas Wentworth Higginson, Samuel Gridley Howe and others effectively take up arms against their government, providing comfort and material aid to John Brown and his raid on Harper's Ferry.

The 1850 compromise was not well received in Fillmore's Whig Party and he was denied the presidential nomination. He returned to Buffalo, joined the secret, nativist, anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant Know-Nothing Party, ran as its presidential candidate in 1856 and then retired from public life. Henry Clay praised Fillmore as "able, enlightened, indefatigable, and patriotic." Queen Victoria, who met him years later, described him as the handsomest man she had ever seen. Historians generally consider him to have been hardworking and honest but left only a limited mark on his generation.

Historians, however, take a more generous view of John Adams, the first president to sleep in the White House. An acknowledged Unitarian as

was his son, John Quincy, both of whom are buried, along with First Ladies Abigail and Louisa in the United First Parish Church (UU) in Quincy, Massachusetts on land donated by John in 1822. It is the only church in the nation housing the remains of two presidents and first ladies. Hailed as the “Atlas of Independence,” he was by his own admission obnoxious and disliked, subjected to nascent partisan bickering from his own party the Federalists led by Alexander Hamilton and from the opposition Democratic-Republicans of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Born during “theological and ecclesiastical controversy” (the Great Awakening), he began reading books about religion at the age of 12 and never stopped. In a letter to John Quincy in 1816, he wrote that “I have neglected all sciences but Government and Religion.”

Adams was a son of the Enlightenment, embracing reason over dogma. In the same letter to John Quincy, he wrote “Let the human mind loose. It must be loose. It will be loose. Superstition and dogmatism cannot confine it.” Although a Unitarian, Adams professed that “the Christian

Religion as I understand it is the best,” primarily because it instructed humankind to follow the “great principle of the law of nature and nations, love your neighbor as yourself and do to others as you would that others should do to you.” But as a Unitarian, Adams had harsh words for those who subscribed to Athanasius, the fourth century church father credited with formally defining the doctrine of the trinity. He expressed amazement in a letter to John Quincy that after all had been written by men like Joseph Priestley, his son persisted in holding to the Athanasian creed. The early fathers were more liberal than today, he admonished John Quincy. It was simply not the case and never would be that only Calvinists went to heaven.

Adams advised anyone troubled by the Unitarian-Trinitarian controversy to ask “Is the universe governed by intelligence, wisdom and benevolence?” Adams decided unequivocally “yes” and from this, he said, “I have derived all my system of divinity.” As he wrote to his daughter-in-law in 1821, “I do not however attach much importance to creeds because I believe he cannot be wrong whose life is right.”

Adams in Braintree and Jefferson in Monticello saw the world passing them by in the second decade of the 1800's. It turns out that their Universalist friend, Benjamin Rush, in 1812 brought together the two former allies in independence who had become bitter political enemies, starting a remarkable correspondence that ended when they both died on the same day, July 4, 1826, fifty years after the Declaration of Independence was signed.

Like Adams, Jefferson was a son of the Enlightenment. Raised an Anglican, he is considered a deist, having never joined a Unitarian church, although the UUA has adopted him as one of us. He was an avid reader of Joseph Priestley with whom he corresponded regularly as he did with Benjamin Rush. In 1804, Jefferson urged Priestley to write a digest of the moral teachings of Jesus, omitting the "mysticisms, fancies and falsehoods." Priestley did not live to finish the task, so Jefferson took it upon himself to complete *The Life and Morals of Jesus*. Stripped of angels and heavenly pronouncements, Jefferson's bible removed the



“hocus-pocus phantasm of Athanasius and company.” He wrote in 1822, that “the present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion of the United States,” and observed in the same year to Harvard professor Benjamin Waterhouse, “I trust that there is not a young man living in the U.S. who will not die an Unitarian.” As with Adams, Jefferson expressed religion as “fear God and love thy neighbor.”

On April 29, 1962, President John Kennedy, hosting a dinner honoring Nobel Prize winners remarked that “this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge that has ever been gathered at the White House with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.” Kennedy was wrong. Historians and psychologists calculating presidential IQ have determined that John Quincy Adams possessed the highest IQ. He is also considered to be our greatest Secretary of State, architect of the Monroe Doctrine. His presidency, eh, not so much. But elected to the House of Representatives in 1831, he single-handedly battled the Southern, slaveholder-dominated House that subjected him to a gag rule, censure and expulsion. Historians agree that

his defense of civil rights was the crowning point of his long public career. Nicknamed the “Hell-hound of slavery,” his motto was “Duty is ours. Results are God’s.”

Perhaps it was the **exchange** of exposing young Quincy from the great minds of Europe as his father’s secretary **to**, as presidential historian Richard Brookhiser notes, “pedantic Unitarian clergymen at Harvard,” that Quincy continued to hold to the Athanasian creed. But around 1818, John Quincy seemed to accept, at least grudgingly, Unitarian religious beliefs, founding, along with 27 others, including Capitol Architect Charles Bullfinch and Vice President John Calhoun, the First Unitarian Church in DC in 1824. Today it is All Souls Church.

Another, much later attendee at All Souls, the last Unitarian to hold our nation’s highest office was rotund William Howard Taft who had served also as Chief Justice of the United States and was probably the most theologically attuned of this group, having served for ten years as the president of the Unitarian Conference, the forerunner of the UUA. He was a man of wide girth – six feet tall and over 300 pounds. It is not true

that because of his size he got stuck in the White House bathtub and had to be extricated by the first lady and members of the cabinet. Taft is considered an able administrator, intelligent jurist, but a poor politician. His public resume is impressive: U.S. Solicitor General, Federal Judge, Governor-General of the Philippines, professor of law, President of the United States, and a cautiously conservative Chief Justice of the United States, appointed by President Warren G. Harding in 1921 and served in that post until just before his death in 1930. As Chief Justice, Taft produced a series of rulings that today's Unitarian Universalists would find embarrassing. But he was a strong defender of his Unitarian faith.

During the 1908 presidential election, evangelical Protestants, most from the Midwest, attacked Taft's Unitarianism viciously, calling him an infidel and denouncing his disbelief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Taft responded to these attacks. "To go into a dogmatic discussion of creed I will not do whether I am defeated or not. If the American electorate is so narrow as not to elect a Unitarian, well and good. I can stand it.?" The New York Times of October 26, 1908, reported a sermon preached by

the Rev. John Haynes Holmes at the Unitarian Church of the Messiah on 34<sup>th</sup> Street and Park Avenue in New York City that defended Taft. “For the first time in more than 100 years,” Holmes said, “this country is in the midst of a political campaign in which religion has been raised against one of the candidates, William Howard Taft, a Unitarian.”

Surprisingly, Holmes and Taft would fall out during the Unitarian Conference in 1917 in Montreal. Congress had passed the Espionage Act that made it illegal to speak out against U.S. involvement in the World War, much like the Alien and Sedition Acts during the Adams administration that Joseph Priestley ran afoul of. Taft and Holmes debated the issue and the Unitarians eventually agreed with Taft to support the war.

In his speech to the assembly, Taft asked, “Now, what are Unitarians? Are they Christians? Of course, that is a matter of definition. If a man can be a Christian only when he believes in the literal truth of the creed as it is recited in the orthodox evangelical churches, then we Unitarians are not Christians. A Unitarian believes that Jesus Christ founded a new

religion and a new religious philosophy on the love of God for man, and of men for one another, and for God, and taught it by his life and practice, with... simplicity and all-compelling force that it lived after him in the souls of men.... Unitarians, however, do not find the evidence of the truth of many traditions which have attached themselves to the life and history of Jesus to be strong enough to overcome the presumption against supernatural intervention in the order of nature. They feel the life of Jesus as a man to be more helpful to them, as a religious inspiration, than if he is to be regarded as God in human form. The Unitarians have always emphasized the life of Jesus in his teaching of love as the foundation of all things spiritual, and the motive and end of the Kingdom of God.”

The last Unitarian to seek the presidency was Adlai Stevenson. As we know, his campaign against popular General, then President Eisenhower, ended in defeat. On the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Unitarian Church in Bloomington, Illinois, he said “If a liberal wishes to win friends and influence people (and what liberal doesn’t?), then one thing

he cannot afford is the luxury of dogmatism. Our reasonableness,” he went on to say, “must always be motivated by the urge to learn, to share and to find common ground.”

“These are the times that try men’s souls.” Shall we be “summer soldiers and sunshine patriots” who shrink from the service of their country or stand by it now?

While a UU is not on the presidential ballot, we can, as a small denomination, stand by our country. We are not powerless. Join with other UUs and the UUtheVote campaign. Watch for emails, visit our Channing Justice website. Contact me. Together we’ll stand by our country.

May it be so.

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