

Famous Unitarians

This brief paper is about famous Unitarians throughout history.

A little research on this subject produces astounding results. The full list of famous Unitarians is long, so I'm going to just hit some highlights, by category – and then I'll share with you some of the things these people had to say.

Among scientists, Unitarians probably began with the famous mathematician and physicist Sir Isaac Newton. Formal Unitarianism had not quite yet started in England in Newton's time, but his personal religious writings were quite similar and influenced by Unitarianism in Poland and Romania.

Fairly soon thereafter, chemist Joseph Priestly helped found Unitarianism in England. Priestly was a friend of Ben Franklin and was the scientist who first isolated oxygen and other gases. He also invented carbonated water.

Other Unitarian scientists included Charles Darwin, Alexander Graham Bell, Samuel F. B. Morse, and Linus Pauling. In medicine, the famous doctor and humanitarian, Albert Schweitzer, was a Unitarian.

Four U.S. presidents were Unitarians: John Adams, John Quincy Adams, William Howard Taft, and Millard Fillmore. Another was almost president: Adlai Stevenson. In addition, Thomas Jefferson, although not a member of any Unitarian group, often referred to himself as a Unitarian.

In legal circles, John Marshall, the fourth chief justice of the Supreme Court, was a Unitarian. So were justices Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., and William O. Douglas, as well as the famed defense attorney Clarence Darrow.

In architecture, both Frank Lloyd Wright and Buckminster Fuller were Unitarians.

In communications, the most famous of the old newspaper editors, Horace Greeley, was a Universalist. He is best remembered for his advice: "Go west, young man." But he also was a promoter of socialism, vegetarianism, feminism, and temperance.

There have been prominent Unitarian artists and entertainers: N.C. Wyeth, comedian and talk show host Steve Allen, Christopher Reeve (who played Superman), Pete Seeger, Diahann Carroll, Paul Newman and his wife Joanne Woodward, and P.T. Barnum.

Two of the biggest groups of famous Unitarians were authors and social action activists.

The writers are a who's who of literature: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Charles Dickens, Louisa May Alcott, e e cummings, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horatio Alger, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Henry David Thoreau, Beatrix Potter, and Bret Hart. Among more modern writers, there was Ray Bradbury, Rod Serling, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and James A. Michener.

The Unitarian social activists were truly amazing. Unitarians fought slavery, and they virtually owned the women's suffrage movement. They also spearheaded aid to the sick and wounded.

It was Clara Barton who risked her life to bring supplies and care to Civil War soldiers. She later founded the American Red Cross. And a little before Clara came the founder of modern nursing, Unitarian Florence Nightingale. She saved thousands of lives just by introducing the concept of sanitation during the Crimean War.

Also in the field of humane social action was Dorothea Dix, who in the 19th century advocated successfully for the treatment of mental illness. Her efforts resulted in the first attempts to deal with mental disease scientifically in hospitals.

Unitarians took positions on women's rights starting more than 200 years ago. In 1792, British Unitarian Mary Wollstonecraft published a book titled "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman." She had the wild idea that women should have the right to an education just like men.

There was Julia Ward Howe, who pushed for women's suffrage and the abolition of slavery, and she also wrote the Battle Hymn of the Republic. By the way, she wrote the words but borrowed the tune, which was from the song John Brown's Body.

Lucy Stone was an early Unitarian champion for both women's rights and abolition. In 1847, she graduated from Oberlin College in Ohio. College administrators asked her to write the commencement address. She refused. Why? Because the administrators told her that although they'd appreciate it if she wrote the speech, it had to be delivered by a man.

By the late 1800s, it was Unitarian Emily Stowe who led the charge for women's rights. With her was perhaps the most famous Unitarian social reformer, Susan B. Anthony.

Susan was born into a Quaker family comprised of several activists. Her father was an advocate for abolition and temperance. Her brother Merritt fought with John Brown against slavery forces in Kansas. Susan

herself joined a Unitarian church known for social activism in Rochester, NY.

Susan's own history of social activism spanned multiple subjects. It started with slavery. By age 17, she was gathering signatures on anti-slavery petitions.

She helped form a temperance society in New York state, and later she was cofounder and president of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association.

In 1872, Susan Anthony was arrested in Rochester for the crime of: voting while female. Her trial was widely publicized, and she delivered a famous suffrage speech at the end of it. But she was found guilty and fined \$100. She refused to pay.

Let's now switch to matters of racial justice. You've already heard about the several well-known Unitarians who advocated for the abolition of slavery.

Some went a lot further. This is not so well known, but it was mainly Unitarians that financed John Brown's raid on the federal armory in Harper's Ferry, VA, in 1859. He was seeking to foment a national slave rebellion.

Looking at more recent civil rights icons, one of them, Whitney Young, was a Unitarian.

So was Viola Liuzzo, murdered by members of the Ku Klux Klan in Alabama after helping run the marches from Selma to Montgomery. It was about the same time that the Unitarian minister James Reeb was beaten to death in Selma in 1965 by white supremacists.

I don't mean to suggest, by the way, that Unitarians led the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King was a Baptist and Malcolm X was a Muslim. But it's safe to say that Unitarians have stood for racial justice all along.

Of course, none of these facts tell you the essence of a person. It helps to hear some of the things that these famous Unitarians said.

Let's listen first to some contemporaries or near contemporaries.

Sci-Fi writer Ray Bradbury said: "You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them." Sounds like an issue we're dealing with today.

One of my favorite near-contemporaries (my mother voted for him) was Adlai Stevenson, who ran for president against Dwight Eisenhower. He was one of the wittiest politicians. He said:

“A hypocrite is the kind of politician who would cut down a redwood tree, then mount the stump and make a speech for conservation.”

“Flattery is all right so long as you don't inhale.”

“The human race has improved everything, but the human race.”

“Man does not live by words alone, despite the fact that sometimes he has to eat them.”

How about racial prejudice? Unitarian Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote: “The mind of a bigot is like the pupil of the eye. The more light you shine on it, the more it will contract.”

Rod Serling, creator of the Twilight Zone, declared: “...the worst aspect of our time is prejudice... In almost everything I've written, there is a thread of this - man's seemingly palpable need to dislike someone other than himself.”

The Unitarian architect R. Buckminster Fuller, the dome guy, was known for a number of thought-provoking remarks, like these:

“It seems to me that God is a verb, not a noun.”

“Either war is obsolete, or men are.”

Speaking of violence, the Unitarian comedian and talk show host Steve Allen once declared:

“If the Old Testament were a reliable guide in the matter of capital punishment, half the people in the United States would have to be killed tomorrow.”

One of the funniest modern writers was Kurt Vonnegut. He said:

“I tell you, we are here on Earth to fart around, and don't let anybody tell you different.”

He also said:

“True terror is to wake up one morning and discover that your high school class is running the country.”

The older prominent Unitarians often had very meaningful things to say.

Clara Barton said: “I may sometimes be willing to teach for nothing, but if paid at all, I shall never do a man’s work for less than a man’s pay.”

The original famous nurse, Florence Nightingale, had this self-analytic comment which she no doubt meant as an admonishment to others: “I attribute my success to this – I never gave or took any excuse.”

Nightingale was extremely well known. The British put her image on paper currency – the only female to be so honored other than monarchs for more than 150 years.

Less well known, Florence Nightingale had a strong interest in mysticism and meditation. She once made this rather surreal comment: “A human being does not cease to exist at death. It is change, not destruction, which takes place.”

Charles Dickens was, of course, the great writer who focused on the poor and on justice. He had this comment on religion:

“We do not really want a religion that is right where we are right. What we want is a religion that is right where we are wrong. We do not want, as the newspapers say, a church that will move with the world. We want a church that will move the world.”

And long before Dickens was born, there was Sir Isaac Newton. Yet he said things in the late 1600s that sound perfectly contemporary. He said:

“I can calculate the motion of heavenly bodies but not the madness of people.”

“What we know is a drop, what we don’t know is an ocean.”

Let’s turn next to some famous Unitarians who made rather strident remarks.

One was Susan B. Anthony, a person of strong convictions. She wrote:

"Forget conventionalisms; forget what the world thinks of you stepping out of your place; think your best thoughts, speak your best words, work your best works, looking to your own conscience for approval."

"Cautious, careful people, always casting about to preserve their reputations... can never effect a reform."

And she said something that gives me hope, and maybe you too.

"The older I get, the greater power I seem to have to help the world. I am like a snowball - the further I am rolled the more I gain."

Some of the famous Unitarians were rather critical of the religious beliefs of their day, to put it mildly. Our own second U.S. president, John Adams, was one of these.

Once, he exclaimed: "This would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it." Can you imagine a politician saying that today?

He also said: "The United States is not a Christian nation any more than it is a Jewish or a Mohammedan nation."

And, then there was Charles Darwin. His theory of evolution really rankled the more dogmatic Christian believers. But the flip side was, Darwin felt the same about them. He wrote:

"I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true, for if so, the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother and almost all of my friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine."

Let's end with something uplifting – well-known quotes from Dr. Albert Schweitzer. He was a Lutheran who joined a Unitarian church.

Once, at least, Schweitzer made a light-hearted comment. "There are two means of refuge from the miseries of life: music and cats."

More commonly, Schweitzer said serious and wonderful things, kind of saint-like. He said:

"The purpose of human life is to serve, and to show compassion and the will to help others."

"The first step in the evolution of ethics is a sense of solidarity with other human beings."

His advice to us: "Do something for somebody every day for which you do not get paid."

Across the centuries, Unitarians have changed the world. We can be proud of our heritage. Thanks.

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