

The Religious Affiliation and Beliefs of the
Third United States President

Thomas Jefferson

Born: April 13, 1743 Died: July 4, 1826

Term of Office: 1801 - 1809

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Thomas Jefferson remains one of the nation's most popular and respected Presidents and is claimed by many groups. His family was among the early British emigrants to Virginia. His ancestors came from Wales. His grandfather settled in Chesterfield, Virginia and had three sons. One of the sons, Peter, married Jane Randolph, a daughter of Isham Randolph, of Scottish descent. Peter and Jane became the parents of Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson was born at Shadwell, Virginia, just east of Charlottesville/Monticello. Thomas Jefferson, thus, came from a combination of Scottish/Welsh background.

Thomas entered grammar school at the age of five and at the age of nine he began studying the classics. His father died in 1760 leaving a widow with eight children. He also left a handsome estate to his family. The land he called Monticello, was left to Thomas. In that same year, 1760, at the age of 17, Thomas entered William & Mary College. He remained there for two years, and received his first philosophical teachings and subjects of scientific investigation. He was admitted to the bar at age 23, and only seven years later, after amassing a fortune, he gave up the practice because of his dislike for lawyers and settled down to being a country gentleman.

Jefferson's retirement didn't last long. He was elected to the Virginia House of Burgesses and took an active part in the movement for independence from England. He wrote several suggestions to Virginia's delegates to the Continental Congress and was chosen to draft the Declaration of Independence. He later served in Congress, served as Minister to France, Governor of Virginia, helped write the Virginia constitution, served as Secretary of State under President George Washington, and helped establish the University of Virginia. Sounds like a pretty full and eventful life to me.

Most people have religious beliefs that influence their lives and that includes Mr. Jefferson. So, let us examine the interesting **religious** beliefs of Thomas Jefferson. He was raised as an Episcopalian/Anglican. He was influenced by English Deists and held many beliefs in common with Unitarians and sometimes wrote that he thought the whole country would become Unitarian. **He also wrote that the teachings of Jesus contain “the outlines of a system of the most sublime morality which has ever fallen from the lips of man”.** He also wrote, **“I am of a sect by myself, as far as I know.”** Later in his adult life Jefferson did not consider himself a member of any specific denomination. He held many clearly Christian, Deist and Unitarian beliefs but was not a member of any congregation or denomination.

Now, let us define Unitarian. *Unitarian* — *One who believes that the deity exists only in one person; a member of a Christian denomination that stresses individual freedom of belief, the free use of reason in religion, a united world community and liberal social action.*

Today, many Unitarians believe that Jefferson should be considered as a Unitarian. Many Christians believe that he was a Christian. And, a number of Americans who identify themselves as Deists believe that Jefferson should be classified as a Deist. Jefferson was never a member of the Unitarian denomination nor was he ever active in a Unitarian congregation. He did once write that he would have liked to be a member of a Unitarian Church but he was not because there were no Unitarian churches in Virginia. Unitarianism in Jefferson’s time was regarded as a liberal Protestant denomination among many Protestant denominations in America. Today, contemporary Unitarian-Universalists classify their denomination as a distinct religion not confined as a branch of Christianity. However, in Jefferson’s day, Unitarianism was considerably different from its present form and was not thought of as non-Christian. Virtually no one at the time thought of Jefferson as a non-Christian.

Jefferson was deeply interested in the question of religion and morals and he developed a notebook of Jesus' sayings that he found morally and ethically interesting. But, he had a problem dealing with the Divinity of Christ. He also had trouble with descriptions of various events mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments. He could be considered an enlightened skeptic who was also very much interested in Christ as a human being and an ethical teacher. He believed that ethics and morals were important but that is different than saying **religion** is important because morals and ethics can come from many other sources than religion. Jefferson knew that and understood that.

Jefferson was convinced that the authentic words of Jesus written in the New Testament had been contaminated. He believed that early Christians, overly eager to make their religion appealing to pagans, had obscured the words of Jesus with the philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the teachings of Plato. With confidence Jefferson began searching for the diamonds of the Bible. With candles burning late into the night, with his quill pen, he scratched out what he titled *The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth*. He explained that this was an explanation of how his life had been influenced by the doctrines of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. He was uncomfortable with any reference to miracles, so with two copies of the New Testament, he cut and pasted them together, deleting all references to miracles, from turning water to wine and to the resurrection. In his way he presented what he understood was the true message of Jesus. He believed he could tell what was relevant and what was not in the New Testament and had no problem in producing his version of the New Testament.

In the spring of 1826, Jefferson's bodily infirmities caused him to be confined to bed. About July 1st he seemed to improve and friends had hopes of his recovery. He believed that he was about to die and gave instructions accordingly. On July 3rd, he asked about the date and when told, he expressed his desire to live until the next day, in order to "breathe the air" of the 50th anniversary of his country's independence. His wish was granted. On the morning of July 4th, he expressed his gratitude to his friends and servants for their care and said with a clear and distinct voice, "I resign myself to my God, and my child to my country." (His child was his daughter, Mrs. Randolph, to whom he gave instructions about what he wanted his epitaph and tomb to be like.) These were his last words. At about noon on July 4, 1826, he died. It was a remarkable coincidence that the two men of the committee, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, who drew up the Declaration of Independence, who signed it, and who successively held the office of President, died the same day on the 50th anniversary of that historic act. Jefferson died at the age of 83, a few hours before John Adams.

For his tombstone at Monticello, he chose only three accomplishments that he wanted to be remembered for: (1) Authorship of the Declaration of Independence (2) authorship of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and (3) the founding of the University of Virginia.

One of Jefferson's greatest achievements was the bill establishing religious freedom which was drawn up by him and enacted by the Virginia Legislature in 1779.

Section 2 stated:

We the General Assmby of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested or burdened in his body or goods, or shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain their opinions in matters of religion and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

How do we categorize Thomas Jefferson? He considered himself a deist and a follower of Jesus Christ. This may sound like a contradiction, but in Jefferson's view he believed Jesus to be merely human, not divine, and he believed that the precepts of Jesus were deistical. (At this point you may want to go back to page 3 for refresher on the definition of Deist). He claimed that much of traditional Christianity was in error caused by followers of Jesus in order to promote their cause.

In religion he was a free thinker.

In morals...pure and unspotted (although there are some who believe otherwise).

In politics...he was patriotic, honest, ardent and benevolent.

He was a strong supporter of the separation of church and state, believing that both government and religion would be strengthened by keeping free of the corrupting influence of the other. Did you catch that? The corrupting influence of both.

His words, not mine. It does make you think, doesn't it?

Whatever one may believe of the complicated beliefs of Thomas Jefferson, one thing is clear...his life was devoted to his country; the results of his acts are a legacy to mankind.

Religious Affiliation of U.S. Presidents

<u>Denomination</u>	<u>No.</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>% of population at the time</u>	<u>% of population 2008</u>
Episcopalian	11	26	15.4	1.7
Presbyterian	10	24	5.1	2.8
Methodist	5	12	1.5	8.0
Baptist	4	9	0.5	18.0
Unitarian	4	9	47.5	0.2
Disciples of Christ	3	7	18.7	0.4
Dutch Reformed	2	5	48.0	0.1
Quaker	2	5	6.9	0.7
Congregationist	2	2	4.0	0.6
Catholic	1	2	0.1	24.5
Jehovah's Witness	1	2	6.0	0.6

State of Birth-19 States

- 8 - **Virginia** - Washington - Jefferson - Madison - Monroe
W.H. Harrison - John Tyler - Zachary Taylor - Wilson
- 7 - **Ohio** - U.S. Grant - Rutherford B. Hays - James Garfield
Benj. Harrison - Wm. McKinley - Wm. H. Taft - Warren Harding
- 4 - **Massachusetts** - John Adams-John Q. Adams-J. Kennedy- **G.Bush 41**
- 4 - **New York**-Van Buren-Fillmore-T. Roosevelt-Franklin Roosevelt
- 2 - **Vermont** - Chester A. Arthur-Calvin Coolidge
- 2 - **Texas** - Dwight Eisenhower-Lyndon Johnson
- 1 - **So. Carolina** - Andrew Jackson
- 1 - **No. Carolina** - James K. Polk
- 1 - **New Hampshire** - Ambrose Pierce
- 1 - **New Jersey** - Grover Cleveland
- 1 - **Iowa** - Herbert Hoover
- 1 - **Kentucky** - Abraham Lincoln
- 1 - **Pennsylvania** - James Buchanan
- 1 - **California** - Richard Nixon
- 1 - **Nebraska** - Gerald Ford
- 1 - **Georgia** - Jimmy Carter
- 1 - **Illinois** - Ronald Reagan
- 1 - **Arkansas** - Bill Clinton
- 1 - **Connecticut** - **G.W.Bush 43**

AGES

40's - 8

50's - 25

60's - 10

Oldest at Inauguration

69 - Ronald Reagan

68 - Wm. Henry Harrison

Youngest at Inauguration

42 - Teddy Roosevelt

43 - John Kennedy

46 - Bill Clinton

Anglican/Episcopalian

The roots of Anglicanism go back to one of the main branches of Protestantism that emerged from the Reformation. By the late 1600's the Church of England had settled into the Anglican structure that still characterizes it today. However, because Anglicans in general allow for significant freedom and diversity within the areas of Scripture, reason, and tradition, a great many variations in doctrine and practice exist within Anglican churches of different regions.

In summary, Anglican worship tends to be Protestant in doctrine and Catholic in appearance and flavor with rituals and readings, bishops and priests, vestments and ornately decorated churches.

Unitarianism

Religious movement that stresses free use of reason in religion and holds that God exists in only one person, a single personality, in contrast of the Trinity (three persons in one God) and denies the divinity of Jesus and the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Unitarian Christians believe in the teachings of Jesus Christ, as found in the new testament and other early Christian writings and maintain that Jesus was a great man, perhaps even supernatural, but not God himself. They believe in the **moral authority**, but not necessarily the divinity of Jesus.

This theology ranges from the belief that Jesus was merely a great man filled with the Holy Spirit, to the belief that it is the religion **of** Jesus but not **about** Jesus.

Deism

Deism is the belief that by rational methods alone men can know all the true propositions of theology which it is possible, necessary or desirable for men to know. The belief, based solely on reason, in a God who created the universe and then abandoned it, assuming no control over life, exerting no influence on natural phenomena, and giving no supernatural revelation.

Deists have generally subscribed to most of the following propositions:

- One and only one God exists.
- God has moral and intellectual virtues in perfection.
- There is no special providence; no miracles, no divine interventions that violate the natural order.
- Men have been endowed with a rational nature which alone allows them to know truth and their duty when they think and choose in conformity with this nature.
- The purest form of worship and the chief religious obligation is to lead a moral life.
- All other religious beliefs or practices conflicting with these tenets are to be regarded critically, as at best indifferent political institutions and beliefs, or as errors to be condemned and eradicated if it should be prudent to do so.