
Unitarian Universalism

A Research Guide

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Guest Columnist

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Building collections in religious studies is an important and often perplexing duty for many librarians. How much coverage is enough and to what depth? What titles offer appropriate information for the believer, researcher, and critic alike? And how are librarians that are not well versed in a particular faith best able to approach a collection-building project? Tierney V. Dwyer earned a master's degree in library science from Indiana University's School of Library and Information Science in Bloomington. She wrote this guide when she was attending Unitarian Universalism services. Her guide to Unitarian Universalism resources offers assistance to academic librarians seeking to build a deep and reflective collection and to public librarians looking for one or two titles to represent this fascinating religion, a faith that Ralph Waldo Emerson and Louisa May Alcott practiced and that continues to guide and inspire a wide range of worshippers.—*Editor*

Unitarian Universalism is a liberal religious faith grounded in the principles of its founding religions: Unitarianism and Universalism. Unitarianism began in the sixteenth century in Poland and Transylvania, where a number of Christians rejected the idea of the Holy Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as God). These Unitarians declared that they believed in the oneness, or unity, of God. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and America, other Christian reformers discovered what they deemed to be little biblical support for the Christian concept of hell. These reformers came to believe in a universally loving God and felt that God would grant all human beings salvation—they became known as the Universalists. Both of these religions existed independently around the world until 1961, when the American Unitarian Association and the Universalist Church in America joined together to form the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). The UUA, headquartered in Boston, is the loosely governing body of the Unitarian Universalist Church, overseeing more than one thousand congregations in North America. But Unitarian Universalism is not limited to the United States and Canada—Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregations can be found today on nearly every continent, and many of them work under the auspices of the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU).

In a given UU church today, one is likely to find Christians of all denominations, Jews, Wiccans, Buddhists, atheists, agnostics, and people from other religions. The adherents of these faiths are free to practice their religion individually while still taking part in the pluralistic UU church community. While respecting the religious texts and prophets of

other faiths, the UUs do not hold these texts as dogma or regard prophets as holy beings. They embrace the teachings of other faiths to enhance their own understanding of the world and of spirituality. Numbers in UU congregations are steadily growing, and the religion is gaining more visibility in mass media and among the academic and research communities. Information on this faith, however, is very scattered and often difficult to find.

This guide identifies and describes some of the most important and current sources on the topic. It is designed primarily as a guide for academic libraries planning to build, or evaluate an existing, collection on UU and its members. But, with the growing interest in the UU faith, public libraries will find some of the selected texts useful in providing a basic introduction to the subject.

BIBLIOGRAPHIES

Harris, Mark W. "Bibliography," *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004. (ISBN: 0-8108-4869-4).

Harris' "Bibliography" is a comprehensive record of history sources. Although the bibliography is not annotated, it begins with several pages of background information on resources, provides a table of contents, and indexes its items by the following headings: Periodicals and Yearbooks, Published Primary Sources, Biography, Histories (sub-categorized by region, time period, etc.), and Worship.

Robinson, David. "Bibliographic Essay," *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985 (ISBN: 0-313-20946-4).

Although dated, this important source on American Unitarianism and Universalism provides excellent commentary on the quality of the listed materials and contains an exhaustive list of further sources.

Wright, Conrad. *American Unitarian and Universalist Historical Scholarship: A Bibliography of Items Published 1946–1995*. Cambridge, Mass.: Unitarian Universalist Historical Society, 2001 (No ISBN available).

This bibliography focuses primarily on scholarly items pertaining to the history of Unitarianism and Universalism in the United States. Although it was published in 2001, its scope is limited to the years 1946–1995. It is indexed by author, topic, and subject.

ENCYCLOPEDIAS AND DICTIONARIES

Harris, Mark W. *Historical Dictionary of Unitarian Universalism*. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2004 (ISBN: 0-8108-4869-4).

Considered by many to be the most authoritative reference work on UU, the dictionary contains a lengthy chronology and introduction as well as entries on important people, places, causes, issues, countries, and time periods.

Jones, Lindsay, ed. *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. s.v. "Unitarian Universalist Association," by John C. Godbey. 15 vols. (ISBN: 0-0286-5733-0).

This lengthy entry on UU provides an explanation of the UUA including background, history, and beliefs of both Unitarianism and Universalism. Formation and views of the UU church and discussion of the UUA's membership in the International Association for Religious Freedom is also included.

Keller, Rosemary Skinner, Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Marie Cantlon, eds. *Encyclopedia of Women and Religion in North America*. Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006. s.v. "Unitarian Universalist Movement, Women," by Cynthia Grant Tucker. 3 vols. (ISBN: 0-2533-4685-1).

This source is unique in its specific focus on the role and history of women in the UU faith. It profiles important women like Judith Sargent Stevens Murray and Margaret Fuller in the history and formation of both the Unitarian and Universalist church. It discusses the emergence of female clergy and women's groups (which eventually consolidated into the Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation in 1963). The entry contains a lengthy bibliography.

Melton, J. Gordon, and Martin Baumann, eds. *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices*. Santa Barbara, Calif.: ABC-CLIO, 2002. s.v. "Unitarian Universalist Association" (ISBN: 1-5760-7223-1).

This short entry provides background and history of the Unitarian and Universalist churches, discusses the details of the 1961 merger to form the UUA, outlines the organizational structure of the UUA, and lists the mailing address and Web site of the UUA. There is a brief bibliography. The encyclopedia also contains relevant entries on "Unitarianism," "Universalism," and "ICUU."

Roof, Wade Clark, ed. *Contemporary American Religion*. New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2000. s.v. "Unitarian Universalist Churches" (ISBN: 0-0286-4928-1).

This entry discusses the merger of the Universalist Church of America (UCA) and American Unitarian Association (AUA) to form the UUA. There is a brief comparative background of Unitarian and Universalist religions and a discussion of changing movements in each in the twentieth century is also included. Entries cover the dominant views of humanism and naturalistic theism in UU, the UU role in the civil rights, gay/lesbian rights, women's rights movements, and the Vietnam War protests. The entry highlights politics in UU and discusses the demographics of UU members. There is a brief bibliography, and extensive cross-referencing to many entries concerning issues in UU (i.e., "Ordination of Women," "Humanism," etc.).

INDEXES AND ABSTRACTS

While significant articles on the topic can be found in several

THE ALERT COLLECTOR

databases, *ATLA Religion Database* provides the most comprehensive coverage of Unitarian Universalism because its scope is narrowed to religious topics. In Advanced Search, use the keywords “unitarian universalis*” (be sure to truncate) in the Descriptor field, and over one hundred records will be retrieved. For a more narrow and scholarly search, limit the query to Journals or to Peer-Reviewed Journals.

PERIODICALS

Journal of Unitarian Universalist History (formerly the *Proceedings of the Unitarian Universalist Historical Society*). Duxbury, Mass.: Unitarian Universalist Historical Society, 1925–. Irregular (ISSN: 1550-0195).

This peer-reviewed journal is available electronically through *ATLA Religion Database* and in print form. Its broad scope allows it to focus on many issues in the history of the faith. The journal presents scholarly articles as well as book reviews dealing with American, British and Continental UU.

Religious Humanism. Washington, D.C.: American Humanist Association, 1967–. Quarterly. (ISSN: 0034-4095).

This journal is provided online for free at: www.american-humanist.org/hsfamily/rh. Humanism is central to the beliefs held by many UUs, and so it follows that many articles can be found in this periodical pertaining to issues in Unitarian Universalism. The journal contains both poetry and scholarly research articles dealing with religious humanism—a philosophy grounded in rationalism and based on the concept that each human being has an inherent worth and dignity.

Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society. London: Lindsey Press, Unitarian Historical Society, 1917–. Annual. (ISSN: 0082-7800).

An important academic journal, this print and electronic periodical focuses primarily on the studies of the Unitarian Historical Society in the United Kingdom. Its purpose is to publish articles, original documents, notes, and reviews on all aspects of the history of Unitarianism.

UU World (formerly *The World: Journal of the Unitarian Universalist Association*). Boston: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1970–. Bimonthly. (ISSN: 1532-7450 [*UU World*]; 0892-2462 [*The World*]).

Online access (archived from 1999–present) is at www.uuworld.org. This staple periodical functions as both a print and electronic consumer serial mainly for members of the UU church. As a popular magazine, this resource informs UU congregants about current events in the religion, employs faith-building tools, encourages activism, and functions as an excellent insight into the life of the church. This journal is particularly suitable for public libraries.

JOURNAL ARTICLES

Casebolt, J., and T. Niekro. “Some UUs are more U than U: Theological Self-descriptors Chosen by Unitarian Universalists.” *Review of Religious Research* 46, no. 3 (2005): 235–42.

This article discusses part of a larger sociological survey in which members of the UU faith were asked to choose from a list of theological labels they felt best described their religious views. The results revealed a strong presence of unitary and western views of a higher being, new age and neo-pagan ideas, and humanist beliefs.

Green, J. C. “A Liberal Dynamo: The Political Activism of the Unitarian-Universalist Clergy.” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42, no. 4 (2003): 577–90.

Through a mail survey, this study was conducted to analyze the political participation of UUA clergy members. Deeming the UU faith the “preeminent liberal denomination in the United States,” Green discusses the ways in which the UU clergy is highly overrepresented when it comes to political activism. Five specific types of activism were determined in the study, and various forms of UU political activity is discussed.

Lee, R. W. “Strained Bedfellows: Pagans, New Agers, and Starchy Humanists in Unitarian Universalism.” *Sociology of Religion* 56, no. 4 (1995): 379–96.

This is an older article that discusses the then-increase in the number of neo-pagan and new age members in UU churches, and the conflict that arose within the church from this integration. The study is significant in its examination of the historical development of the UU church, and it is important to see the ways in which even a pluralistic religious faith can struggle with new ideas.

Levenson, J. D. “The Problem with Salad Bowl Religion.” *First Things* 78 (Dec. 1997): 10–12.

This short yet important article discusses some of the personal challenges experienced by members of the UU church who may have come from a more traditional religious background, such as Roman Catholicism or Judaism. It asks what will become of some of the more dogmatic religious practices when such freedom of choice, as exhibited by UU, exists.

Miller, R. L.H. “The Religious Value System of Unitarian Universalists.” *Review of Religious Research* 17, no. 3 (1976): 189–208.

Despite its age, this article is a groundbreaking one in the study of Unitarian Universalism, and it is frequently cited. It studies the possibility of a distinctive value system held by UUs, and suggests that UUs possess certain specific character traits.

Oppenheimer, M. “‘The Inherent Worth and Dignity:’ Gay Unitarians and the Birth of Sexual Tolerance in Liberal Re-

ligion." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 7, no. 1 (1996): 73–101.

The author investigates how and why Unitarian Universalism became the first church in the United States to publicly accept homosexuality, as well as the first to have an openly gay member of the clergy. This article provides a thorough examination of the progressive political views of UU, with particular focus on the church's attention to issues affecting gays and lesbians.

Robinson, D. M. "Why Emerson Matters." *Journal of Unitarian Universalist History* 29 (2003): 49–63.

On the bicentennial of Ralph Waldo Emerson's birth in 1803, this article examines the ways in which his teachings still have an impact today, particularly for those who practice UU. Discussed here are Emerson's writings on the importance of self-direction and self-examination, his role in Transcendentalism, and his place in UU history.

BOOKS

Buehrens, John A., and Forrest Church. *A Chosen Faith: An Introduction to Unitarian Universalism*, revised ed. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998 (ISBN: 0-8070-1616-0).

Perhaps the single best resource for public libraries, this definitive UU text comes highly recommended by members of the church and is found at the top of every suggested UU reading list. Written by two ministers of the faith, it contains a history of the religion and a summary of what it means to be a Unitarian Universalist. Also contained are a brief chronology and a list of suggested further readings.

Mendelsohn, Jack. *Being Liberal in an Illiberal Age: Why I Am a Unitarian Universalist*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985 (ISBN: 0-8070-1801-5).

Mendelsohn, a long-time UU minister and prolific writer, makes the case for liberalism and the need for liberal religion in the form of Unitarian Universalism. This text eloquently provides a background of the faith, what it means to be a UU, discusses the role of Christianity and God in the religion, emphasizes the importance of children and young people, the need for action in religion, as well as other issues.

Morrison-Reed, Mark D. *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 (ISBN: 0-8070-1601-2).

Black Pioneers provides a closer look at the role of African Americans in UU, an underrepresented minority in the church. It focuses primarily on two black Unitarian ministers and their attempts to bring their religion to black communities in New York and Chicago. It also analyzes the reasons why UU remains such an overwhelmingly white religion and suggests solutions for more integration. Despite its age, the issues addressed in this book are challenges still faced by the religion today. The appendix contains a list of black Unitarian, Universalist, and UU ministers. Also contained are detailed

research notes, a selected bibliography, and a thorough alphabetical subject index.

Robinson, David. *The Unitarians and the Universalists*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1985 (ISBN: 0-313-20946-4).

Robinson traces the history of these two religions in the United States from colonial times to the twentieth century liberal religious movement. He highlights the demographic and ideological differences and similarities of the two religions. This book functions best as a synthesis of primary and secondary sources on the topic. Notable features are a lengthy biographical dictionary of Unitarians and Universalists, an alphabetical subject index, and a brief chronology.

Tapp, Robert B. *Religion Among the Unitarian Universalists: Converts in the Stepfathers' House*. New York: Seminar Press, 1973 (ISBN: 0-1291-4650-1).

Standing in contrast to other, more philosophical works, this source takes a statistical approach to its study. It examines the results of over twelve thousand questionnaires completed by a sample of UUs, reporting on various important demographic issues. It has a very interesting examination of conversion to UU (which accounts for a huge percentage of membership). There are many informative statistical tables found within the text, appendixes contain explanation of study methods and a reprinting of the questionnaire, and there is also a list of references and an alphabetical subject index.

Wright, Conrad. *The Liberal Christians: Essays on American Unitarian History*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970 (ISBN: 0-8070-1670-5).

Wright's six essays in this book attempt to place the history of American Unitarianism in a broader Protestant liberal religious context. They explore the historical connections between Unitarianism, Transcendentalism, and evangelical Protestantism, and examine "rational religion" in eighteenth-century America. Conrad discusses William Ellery Channing's religious views, the background of Emerson's Divinity School Address, and other issues in the history of the Unitarian church in the United States. This collection serves as an excellent reference on historical principles of the UU church. It contains extensive research notes and an alphabetical subject index.

BIOGRAPHIES

Delbanco, Andrew. *William Ellery Channing: An Essay on the Liberal Spirit in America*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Pr., 1981 (ISBN: 0-6749-5335-5).

As the "founder of American Unitarianism," Channing is one of the most important figures in the history of UU. *Channing* discusses how Channing blended his spirituality and rationality, a key topic in the study of UU. It describes the Channing's abolitionist work, his criticisms of Calvinism

THE ALERT COLLECTOR

and Trinitarians, his commitment to politics, and his role in the foundations of liberal religion in the United States.

Grodzins, Dean. *American Heretic: Theodore Parker and Transcendentalism*. Chapel Hill, N.C.: Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 2002 (ISBN: 0-8078-2710-X).

Parker was another New England Unitarian heavily connected to Transcendentalism, one who often gets less attention than others like Ralph Waldo Emerson, and who was in some ways an eventual outcast in the Unitarian church. The biography is the first in an expected two-volume set. *American Heretic* details Parker's shift from theology to action in the form of his abolitionist work. Parker's most famous writings are analyzed, as well as his break with the Unitarians and Transcendentalists in the 1840s.

Richardson, Robert D. *Emerson: The Mind on Fire*. Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of Calif. Pr., 1995 (ISBN: 0-520-08808-5).

Ralph Waldo Emerson, perhaps best known for his role in the Transcendentalist movement, began as a Unitarian minister in the nineteenth century and is one of America's most famous and popular historical figures. As with most UUs, Emerson's life, work, writings, and intense spirituality are all inextricably intertwined, and this well-respected biography attempts to tackle all of these aspects.

Skemp, Sheila L. *Judith Sargent Murray: A Brief Biography with Documents*. Boston: Bedford Books, 1998 (ISBN: 0-312-11506-7).

A champion of women's education and women's rights in eighteenth-century America, Murray was a founder in the American feminist movement. Chapters are divided by topic, with one chapter focusing on Murray's adoption of Universalism and its impact on her life and work. *Murray* contains fifteen of Murray's own writings, including famous essays and unpublished letters.

INTERNET SOURCES

Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), www.uua.org

This is the official Web site of the UUA, the governing body for over one thousand UU congregations in North

America. It is by far the most comprehensive Web source available on this topic, and is highly authoritative and broad in its presentation.

Famous UUs, www.famousuus.com

This is a biographical database on the lives of Unitarians, Universalists, and UUs, focusing mainly on individuals from the United States and Canada. It is indexed according to specific fields of interest.

ReligiousTolerance.org, www.religioustolerance.org/u-u.htm

This site links to important UU associations around the world, other sources on the Web, and provides brief overviews and definitions about UU history, beliefs, movements, and other significant aspects of the faith.

UU FAQ: Frequently Asked Questions About Unitarian Universalism, www.uufaq.com

This is a very significant source for anyone looking for information on UU from the people who practice it. Self-proclaimed in its biased views, it cannot be discounted because of the wealth of interesting and important links it contains. This site contains sermons by UU ministers, links to UU print materials, and more.

International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU), www.icuu.net

This is the official Web site of the ICUU, a network of Unitarians, Universalists, and UU organizations from twenty-three nations around the world. An excellent, authoritative source for international information about this faith, beyond the typical sources centered in North America or other English-speaking nations. The site contains links to foreign-language UU-related sites.

Self-Described Religious Identification of Adult Population: 1990 and 2001, www.census.gov/compendia/statab/tables/06s0069.xls

This site is issued by the United States Census Bureau and contains authoritative statistical government census data on self-identified religious affiliations of Americans from 1990 and 2001.