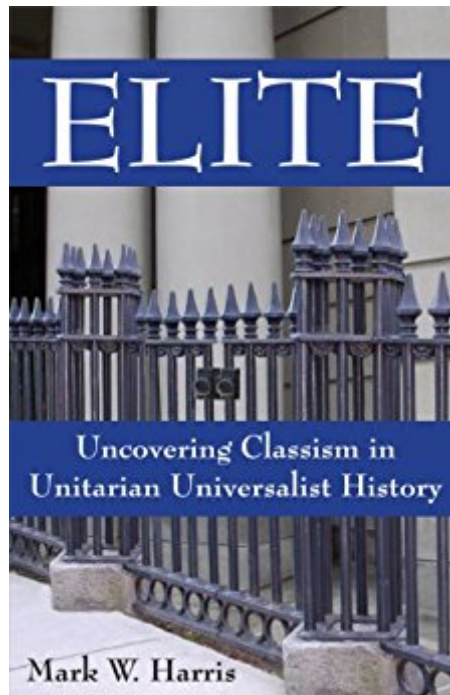


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# Elite: Uncovering Classism In Unitarian Universalist History



## Synopsis

Eugenics and social control aren't the first words that come to mind when Unitarian Universalists recall their proud progressive heritage. This provocative and critical look at class in Unitarian Universalist history reveals that today's largely middle-class and educated congregants are descended from an elite cultural establishment. The wealth, standing and religious conviction of these forebears converged in actions and ideas that would be appalling by modern standards. Mark Harris eloquently argues that this history needs to be known in order for the denomination to envision a broader, more inclusive future. *Elite* is a crucial new resource for the historical understanding of Unitarian Universalism and a call for greater economic diversity. Praise for *Elite* "If our congregations are to find a way forward in addressing issues of class, Mark Harris will have helped pave the way. *Elite* captures our present quirks, strengths, hopes and anxieties in the context of an eye-opening account of past realities." -Gordon Gibson, president, Unitarian Universalist Historical Society "Mark Harris has given us the gift of a well polished mirror and challenged us to look deeply into our class-bound history. Insightfully and crisply written, *Elite* reveals the limits of our vision and the length of our class bias. With compelling clarity, historic heroes and heroines, social reforms and denominational leaders come alive to ask us if we can break out of our class ghetto and become the universalist faith we profess." -Stephen Shick, author, *Be the Change: Poems, Prayers and Meditations for Peacemakers and Justice Seekers* "Unitarian Universalists have long been committed to a faith that is diverse, multicultural, open and welcome to all. Despite these high aspirations, many congregations have struggled to attract new members who don't replicate their existing membership, which tends to be largely white, well educated and prosperous. We have struggled to have open and constructive conversation around social class and privilege. In his new book, Mark Harris offers a different approach to understanding this conundrum. By lifting up our hidden and rarely discussed history around class, we learn about the historical forces that have significantly shaped up as a religion. Perhaps the reasons why we find ourselves so separate from others can begin to become clear, as do new opportunities for connection with those whom we would seek to join." - David Pette, Ministerial Credentialing Director, UUA

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In *Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History*, Mark Harris has given us an important analysis of a central and enduring paradox in the UU world. While the principles and mission of UUism emphasize the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and UU congregations seek to create communities where all will be welcome, the membership of the congregations remain overwhelmingly white and affluent. Harris traces the history of Unitarian and Universalist congregations and organizational strategies in order to determine why this might be the case. Along the way, several very uncomfortable truths for UU's are brought to light (witness a discussion of eugenics, and how many perceived social reformers were actually attempting their social reform by discouraging those perceived as inferior from breeding or even living in the first place). As brought out by Harris, the unfortunate idea (which is of course never openly expressed), is that we UU's want to be open to everyone...as long as they are just like us. Note the following quotes, both from page 112, which characterized the safe but self-defeating course adopted by UUs: "New members should fit in or be like us for us to grow and therefore there is little challenge to confront change" and "Yet, the one world they promoted looked very much like themselves." There seems to be a smug self-satisfaction about how intelligent and enlightened we UU's are, and that this is a faith tradition that only appeals to the highly educated. Harris details organizational efforts at expansion that emphasize the paradox: while the stated mission is inclusivity, the expansion strategy emphasized forming congregations in geographic areas that were more affluent and educated (e.g., page 124:

"Even as we founded new congregations in green leafy suburbs, we articulated a dream of being more diverse."). One gets the sense of the "gods and guns" sentiment towards those perceived as less educated and less affluent; they are not likely UU converts. Harris details several such anecdotes, ones that many UU's could echo and expand. In my own experience as a long-time UU, I have experienced extreme surprise from other UU's that my own politics tend more to the libertarian and that any UU could be a licensed handgun owner. Harris suggests personal connection as the only real remedy for the central paradox noted above. Inherent in that is the idea that UU's will have to be willing to actually listen to others and (horrors!) possibly even change some of their ideas about what makes for a good UU. The core principles of Unitarian Universalism promise mutual support and respect as we search for truth, not a party line of pre-determined truth. In my own experience, it is that party line that often turns off "first and last time" visitors to UU congregations, again defeating the mission of inclusivity. As Harris writes on page 29, "Instead, our `all' is the narrow social circle of the upper middle class, the educated few, or the like-minded liberals we attract". Consider also a quote from page 9: "Perhaps Unitarian Universalism is a thinking person's faith, but we can find thinking persons in all classes and stripes of society. Perhaps we will learn that not all genuine thought leads to the same conclusion." On page 128 we find, "I wish we could embrace different ways to be Unitarian Universalists." A quote on page 104 captures the historical paternalism that needs to be finally defeated: "They wanted a democratic society, but they believed they were the ones who were best equipped to lead that society and should determine its parameters. The ways in which we desire to improve the human race or increase individual control over our own destinies has resulted in projecting our vision of the good life onto others." I have to be honest, I stopped attending the UU church I attended for over ten years due to the "elitist groupthink" I perceived there. Reich's *The Antiracism Trainings* is my own suggested additional reading for expansion of how "party lines" sometimes defeat the very mission they intend to accomplish.

Acts as an expose of UU classism, but almost certainly wasn't intended to be. The history and the demography leaves the result of classism as the only possible outcome. An ex UU, it answered a lot of my uncomfortable questions about the snobbishness and lack of charity.

This was a very well written book about my religion. However, it was disturbing to read how classist the Unitarians especially were. I was shocked to read that in the 19th century many Unitarians believed in eugenics (killing people who were mentally or physically ill in any way). They believed

that would improve society. If that were the law of the land, I would not be alive, nor would some of my closest friends be.

Excellent book that is both thought-provoking and discusses very important "elephants in the room."

Easy. Efficient. Just what I needed in a timely manner !! Thank you !!!

I've been a UU for over 25 years. One of the things I admire about the denomination is that congregations and members are always working towards building community and inclusiveness. This book gives a very good historic account of the early struggles Unitarians and Universalist had with building community and being inclusiveness.

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