

***Elite:***  
***Uncovering Classism***  
***in Unitarian and Universalist History***

by Mark W. Harris (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011)

**Discussion Guide**  
**for Unitarian Universalist Groups**

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# Introduction

*Elite: Uncovering Classism in Unitarian Universalist History* (Skinner House Books, 2011), by the Reverend Mark W. Harris, explores historical events and trends that have led Unitarian Universalist congregations to serve primarily upper middle class, educated, professional people. The book traverses the centuries of Unitarian, Universalist, and Unitarian Universalist history in the United States through the lens of these questions: Who are we? What do we believe? Who is welcome to belong with us?

Harris serves First Parish of Watertown (Massachusetts) Unitarian Universalist as minister and is an adjunct professor at Andover Newton Theological School and Starr King School for the Ministry. *Elite*, based on his 2008 Minns lecture series, is an important work that should be broadly discussed—not just by history buffs in our movement, but by lay and professional leaders who are charting the course for our movement going forward. With this discussion guide, Unitarian Universalists are invited to read *Elite* together and reflect on the questions it raises.

This guide provides three, 60-minute sessions, each expandable to 90 minutes.

- Session 1 is recommended for groups planning to meet just once. Using Harris's Introduction and first and final chapters, participants discuss key themes as they are reflected in their congregation's founding story and as they relate to congregational life today.
- Session 2 explores the parallel histories of Unitarians and Universalists with regard to theology and class identity, as described in Harris' second and third chapters.
- Session 3 focuses on the fourth chapter, which Harris devotes to the complex intertwining of the post-Darwinian eugenics movement with the emergence of contemporary Unitarian Universalism.

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**Discussion Guide**

**Session 1, Founding Stories**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Introduction and Chapters 1 and 5

**Learning Objectives**

- Understand the socio-economic class orientation of our congregation: Who are we? Who do we want to be? Who do we welcome to join us?
- Learn our congregation's founding story and identify ways it has shaped our contemporary class identity
- Consider the socio-economic class orientation of our Unitarian Universalist movement: Who are we? Who do we want to be? Who do we welcome to join us?
- Investigate Unitarian and Universalist history, through Mark Harris's lens, to discover theological, political, and demographic roots of classism in our faith today.

**Materials**

- Chalice, candle, and lighter, or LED battery-operated candle
- Handout 1, Unitarian and Universalist History: Roots of UU Classism?
- Newsprint, markers, and tape

- Optional: Writing paper and pens/pencils

## Preparation

- Copy Handout 1, Unitarian and Universalist History: Roots of UU Classism? for all participants.
- Research the founding story of your congregation so you can present it briefly to the group. Look in archived materials. Talk with long-time members, especially any whose connection with the congregation goes back generations. Optional: Compile your findings as a handout and copy it for the group.
- Write these covenant points on newsprint, and post.
  - We agree to speak from our own experiences and perspectives.
  - We agree to listen respectfully to the experiences and perspectives of others.
  - We agree to pay attention to the group process, making sure everyone has opportunity to speak and to listen.
  - We agree to use this time to share in ethical, religious, and spiritual discernment, rather than to debate congregational policy or practice.
- Plan the personal reflection and sharing time to use journaling, private reflection followed by paired sharing, private reflection followed by whole group sharing, or a combination.
- Write these personal reflection questions on newsprint, and set aside.
  - In terms of class, who am I? What features of my life contribute to my class identity? Is that identity changeable?
  - In what ways does my sense of belonging in this UU congregation reflect my class identity? How could changes in my apparent class affect my sense of belonging here?
  - In terms of class, is everyone welcome in our congregation? Have I ever felt this was not the case for me? For others?

- On another sheet of newsprint, write these closing questions and set aside:
  - How are Harris' questions pertinent to me? Our congregation? Our movement?
  - What is at stake for our community, and for Unitarian Universalism?
  - What can/should we do about it?

## **SESSION PLAN**

### **Chalice Lighting and Covenant** 5 minutes [5 minutes]

Light the chalice. Share these words, from the Introduction to *Elite*:

*I believe that at heart Unitarian Universalists long to have a faith that learns from all kinds of people, rich and poor. I never want to feel there is anyone, including myself, who does not belong.*

Read aloud the covenant points you have posted. Invite participants to add or modify, writing suggestions on the newsprint. Lead the group to accept the covenant by voice or show of hands.

### **Introductions and First Impressions** 5 minutes [10 minutes]

Go around the group, asking each participant to share their name and briefly, something that interested, surprised, or gladdened them in *Elite*.

[90-minute session: Also invite participants to share their role(s) and length of time in the congregation, and, if they wish, something in *Elite* that resonated for them personally. Make it clear there will be additional opportunity later in the session to share personal responses to the book.]

### **Discussion: Key Points** 10 minutes [15 minutes]

Distribute Handout 1, Unitarian and Universalist History: Roots of UU Classism? Explain that in *Elite*, Mark Harris uses a lens of social class to describe a variety of ways congregations have been founded over four centuries of our Unitarian Universalist history. Invite the group to review the handout and seek elements that relate to your own congregation.

Give participants a few moments to read the handout. Or, invite volunteers to read aloud.

Lead a discussion with these questions:

- In terms of social class, status, and power, where do you see a legacy from our founding stories reflected in today's Unitarian Universalism?
- Is there a metaphorical "Standing Order" today? How would you define it? It is particular to our region of the country?
- How do you perceive our congregation and its members in relationship to this "Standing Order?" Are some, all, or none of us part of a de facto ruling class?
- Is there a metaphoric "Fellowship Movement" in Unitarian Universalism today? Is our congregation a part of it? How? What does that say about our connection to the wider community? Is there a "class" discussion?

[90-minute session: Add:

- Together as a congregation, do we have more status and power than any one individual member might have? If so, why? Because of our communal statements, actions, or affiliations? Because of statements, actions, or affiliations of particular members? How is class a factor in how outsiders perceive our congregation?]

### **Our Congregation's Founding Story** 20 minutes [30 minutes]

If you have prepared a handout about your congregation's founding story, distribute it. Present your research. Then, invite participants to share stories they know about the origins of the congregation. Save at least 10 minutes to lead a discussion with these questions:

- What picture of our congregation emerges from our founding story, with regard to class or elitism?
- What legacies of our story are still evident in our congregation today? How?
- In what ways has our congregation changed its class orientation from its founding times?
- What connections do you see between our story and any events or trends Mark Harris mentions in *Elite*? [Suggest participants skim Handout 1 for possibilities.]

**Personal Reflection and Sharing** 15 minutes [20 minutes]

Invite participants into a time of personal reflection. Post the questions you have written on newsprint. Explain the plan for reflection and sharing. If participants will share in pairs or triads, form groups; if participants will journal, distribute writing paper and pens/pencils.

**Closing** 5 minutes [10 minutes]

Post the closing questions you have prepared on newsprint. Invite participants to take a moment and either 1) choose a personal reflection to share from the previous activity or 2) prepare to contribute a closing thought in response one of the closing questions.

If your congregation will offer Session 2 and/or Session 3, tell participants when and where these will meet and give the suggested pre-reading assignments.

Allow participants a moment for reflection. Then, go around the group and invite each person to briefly share, making it clear they may “pass” if they wish.

Thank the group and extinguish the chalice.

## **HANDOUT 1: Unitarian and Universalist History: Roots of UU Classism?**

1. In England, Unitarians lived in the social margins, with church architecture to match. However, in colonial America, Unitarianism developed within the Standing Order of Congregational Churches in New England. Members and clergy held powerful positions in their communities. Standing Order churches were built on hilltops, in town centers. (Standing Order congregations were the churches that colonists founded, well before the American Revolution, which became the institutional centers of towns.)
2. Massachusetts disestablished the Standing Order of Congregational Churches in 1833—the last state to do so; with that, public tax moneys no longer supported these churches. By that time in New England, Unitarian theology was leading followers toward forming a new association, outside of the dominant Congregationalism—yet the Unitarians were firmly part of the new American establishment. Unitarian leaders had much to gain by cultivating an elite cultural status. In New England, institutions such as Harvard University and the Boston Athenaeum and the “conspicuous consumption of the merchant elite” symbolized that status. (p. 33)
3. The Universalist movement was one among several Protestant movements that challenged the position and public funding of Standing Order congregations.
4. Universalism was characterized by itinerant preachers who served in far-flung, often rural communities, moving south, north, and especially west, with the European population.
5. “After the Civil War, a campaign was begun by the American Unitarian Association to found churches in college and university towns. ...[T]his ‘College Town Mission’ program proved to be one of the association’s most successful extension activities and included new congregations in Ithaca, New York, and Iowa City, Iowa. ...The plan was to evangelize highly educated people, or a cultured elite.” (p. 105)
6. In the mid-20th century, the American Unitarian Associations expansion effort, under minister-at-large Lon Ray Call, identified barriers that might work against a successful start-

up of a Unitarian congregation in a new community. These included an existing liberal congregation in the community, “the percentage of foreign born and negro populations,” and other criteria including how people earned their living, what they read, and whether they were interested in culture and higher education. These criteria gave a foundation to the fellowship movement, an expansion effort that supported small groups of Unitarians to form lay-led congregations. .... “Call put together the ‘Organizational Guide’ for the fellowship movement. In it he said that Unitarianism attracts people from all walks of life, but then qualified that by stating that people in some professions are more responsive to liberal religion’s appeal. These included natural scientists, social scientists, architects and engineers, social workers, and modern educators.” (p. 109-110)

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**Discussion Guide**

**Session 2, How Do We Thrive? How Are We Saved?**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Chapters 2 and 3, and Afterward

**Learning Objectives**

- Gain knowledge of 19th-century Unitarian and Universalist theological ideas and discover how they are reflected in our faith today
- Consider how social class is expressed in congregational life today
- Make connections between how social class was expressed in our institutional heritage and how it is expressed in congregational life today
- Consider and share ideas and insights that might create a more welcoming congregational culture with regard to social class.

**Materials**

- Chalice, candle, and lighter, or LED battery-operated candle
- Covenant, from Session 1
- Handout 2, The 19th-Century Unitarians and Universalists – How Do We Thrive?

- How Are We Saved? and (optional) a basket
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Writing paper and pens/pencils

## **Preparation**

- Post the covenant the group made in Session 1.
- Print the handout. Decide if you will distribute the entire handout as written (copy for all participants) or cut it into strips to be pulled from a basket and read aloud by participants.
- Decide whether you will use small groups in the second discussion activity (recommended for a 60-minute session) or invite the group to choose one or two topics for the whole group to discuss together (recommended for a 90-minute session). Write this list of topics on newsprint and post:
  - Sermon style or worship style
  - Assumptions about education and occupation of members
  - Belief in the congregation's ability to make change because of the power held by individual members due to class status (networking opportunities, leadership in public and community institutions, financial means)
  - Choices of social justice project (whom do we serve? how do we serve?)
  - Assumptions about congregational stewardship and other money issues
  - Summer worship services
- Decide whether personal reflection time will include journaling, paired sharing, silence followed by whole group sharing, or some combination of the three. Write on newsprint and set aside:
  - What issues or ideas have arisen for you during this session?
  - What new insights have you gained? What do you wish to explore further?
  - What ideas do you have for changing your congregational culture (if it needs changing)?

## SESSION PLAN

### **Chalice Lighting/Opening Reading** 5 minutes [5 minutes]

Light the chalice and share these words of Ralph Waldo Emerson (*Singing the Living Tradition*, Reading 563):

*A person will worship something – have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our mind- but it will out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping we are becoming.*

Review the covenant from Session 1. If there are new people in the group, invite each participant to introduce themselves.

### **Discussion: Our 19th-Century Heritage** 30 minutes [15 minutes]

Distribute the handout, which presents items drawn from Harris' text, or pass a basket containing paper slips with items from the handout. Invite volunteers to read the items aloud, pausing after each one to discuss, using these questions:

- What does this item say about how we thrive or are saved?
- What does it say about the nature of people? The nature of God?
- What does it say about our institutional or theological heritage?
- Is this 19th-century idea reflected in UU theology today? How? In Unitarian Universalist institutions today? How?

### **Discussion: How Is Social Class Reflected in Our Congregation Today?** 20 minutes [30 minutes – Choose one topic and discuss in a large group.]

Call attention to the posted list of discussion topics. Invite the whole group to choose one or two topics to discuss. Or, form small groups and invite each group to choose a discussion topic from the list (recommended for 90-minute session).

For each topic, ask:

- What assumptions in our congregation reflect and reinforce a class bias?

- What kinds of members are wanted, and what do they bring to the table?
- Is our 19th-century heritage reflected in our congregational life today? How?

If you have divided into small groups, allow time for each group to report highlights of their conversation.

**Personal Reflection and Sharing** 15 minutes [20 minutes]

Post the questions you have written on newsprint and invite participants into a time of reflection and sharing. Depending on group size and dynamics, you may choose to invite participants to journal, share in pairs, or reflect in silence followed by large group sharing. Distribute writing materials if you wish participants to journal.

**Closing Reading or Hymn** 5 minutes [5 minutes]

Close by singing Hymn 126 in *Singing the Living Tradition* or by reading aloud the lyrics. Explain that the first verse, written in 1757 by Methodist minister Robert Robinson, was well loved by Universalists of the 19th century. Verses two and three were written by Rev. Eugene Navias, who was director of the UUA RE Department from 1982 to 1993.

*(verse 1) Come thou fount of ev'ry blessing, tune our hearts to sing thy grace.*

*Streams of mercy never ceasing, call for songs of loudest praise.*

*While the hope of life's perfection fills our hearts with joy and love,*

*Teach us ever to be faithful, may we still thy goodness prove.*

*(verse 2) Come, thou fount of ev'ry vision, lift our eyes to what may come.*

*See the lion and the lambkin dwell together in thy home.*

*Hear the cries of war fall silent, feel our love glow like the sun.*

*When we all serve one another, then our heaven is begun.*

*(verse 3) Come, thou fount of inspiration, turn our lives to higher ways.*

*Lift our gloom and desperation, show the promise of this day.*

*Help us bind ourselves in union, help our hands tell of thy love.*

*With thine aid, O fount of justice, earth be fair as heav'n above.*

## **HANDOUT 2: The 19th-century Unitarians and Universalists – How do we thrive? How are we saved?**

1. In 1835, Henry Ware, Jr. said that many people were attracted to Unitarian churches because they disliked Calvinism and were “anti-everything severe and urgent in religion.” **High culture** became a religious substitute as it sought to **refine the person and elevate the mind**. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote, “All the literary men of Massachusetts were Unitarian; all the trustees and professors of Harvard College were Unitarians; all the elite of wealth and fashion crowded Unitarian churches; the judges on the bench were Unitarian.”

2. Unitarian beliefs offered **fewer constraints on worldly success** than those of other religious denominations of the mid-1800s. Joseph Stevens Buckminster of the Brattle Street Church said that the Savior does not require people “to throw their wealth into the sea or to inflict upon themselves unnatural austerities.” Nothing indicates that we should refuse the “riches, honors, and pleasures” of this world.

3. Unitarian minister Bernard Whitman preached the golden rule. He advocated a non-sectarian Christian faith that would teach people how to live, not what to believe. He preached that **success could be achieved through hard work and education** and that all people could improve themselves.

4. Joseph Tuckerman began a Ministry at Large to the poor in 1826. His mission was to elevate the masses and to “**enable every individual to surmount every obstacle in the way to the highest moral completeness within his attainment.**” He wanted to create a moral connection between rich and poor, so that the favored classes would come to understand the realities of poverty and be moved to support poor people through voluntary charity.

5. The Transcendentalist movement of the mid-1800s was critical of Unitarianism. A **central conflict** within the Transcendentalist movement was whether it is most important to **improve oneself** and one’s personal character, the position represented by Emerson or to

**improve society**, the position represented by utopian community co-founder George Ripley. Both men were Unitarian ministers who resigned their pulpits.

6. In contrast to the notion that salvation is associated with individual achievement and success, early Universalists understood that the **embrace of God is meant for all humanity**. Salvation for the individual was bound up in the community of the whole. The **entire human family** is drawn up into God's love in **one moral community**.

7. Universalist leader Hosea Ballou was concerned that an overly educated minister would lose his gospel faith. He preached **plain Bible truths in informal, homespun, and emotional** ways. He wrote of a human relationship to a **loving God** who wishes for all to be happy and **ultimately redeems all**.

8. Universalist theology maintains that human sin is punished in this life. There are no distinctions in heaven, and **God's love is available to all**, no matter what kind of life they have led.

9. Universalists preached a gospel of **equality and possibility**. Universalist Eunice Richardson, a white woman, was a member of the urban working poor who found hope in a **faith that promised an assurance on the other side of this life**. Her Universalist faith helped her find courage to marry across the color line because Universalism was a **faith that included all people** in its scheme of salvation.

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**Discussion Guide**  
**Session 3, Scientific Salvation**

**Time:** 60 minutes [90 minutes]

**Suggested Reading:** Chapter 4

**Learning Objectives**

- Understand the theological and scientific underpinnings of various post-Darwinian attitudes toward human salvation, especially attitudes that grounded the eugenics movement
- Connect Unitarian and Universalist beliefs about salvation and about science to our faith forebears' perspectives on social class
- Examine contradictions between some extensions of science's revelations and the principle of each human being's inherent worth and dignity
- Seek to uncover strains of "scientific salvation" in our contemporary congregations' approach to political, economic, and human justice issues.

**Materials**

- Chalice, candle, and lighter, or LED battery-operated candle
- Covenant, from Session 1

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- Handout 3, Quotations
- Newsprint, markers, and tape
- Optional: Copies of *Singing the Living Tradition*

## Preparation

- Post the covenant the group made in Session 1.
- Copy Handout 3 for all participants.

## SESSION PLAN

### Chalice Lighting/Opening Hymn 5 minutes [5 minutes]

Light the chalice and lead the group to sing or read in unison these verses of Hymn 113 in *Singing the Living Tradition*, “Where Is Our Holy Church?” Tell the group this hymn was written in 1928 by a Unitarian, Edwin Henry Wilson.

*Where is our holy church? Where race and class unite as equal persons in the search for beauty truth and right.*

*Where is our holy writ? Where'er a human heart a sacred torch of truth has lit, by inspiration taught.*

*Where is our holy One? A mighty host respond; the people rise in every land, to break the captive's bond.*

*Where is our holy land? Within the human soul, wherever free minds truly seek with character the goal.*

Review the covenant from Session 1. If there are new people in the group, invite each participant to introduce themselves.

### Discussion of Hymn Lyrics [15 minutes, suggested for 90-minute session only]

Based on the readings in the chapter and the lyrics of the 1928 hymn, explore different notions of what it means to improve humankind.

### **Discussion of Quotations** 20 minutes [20 minutes]

Distribute Handout 3, Quotations. Read the first three aloud or have volunteers do so.

Ask:

- Question: How do these widely disparate threads from our history fit together? In your observation, how consistent a theme in Unitarian Universalism is the mission to improve humankind?
- What ethical concerns come up in regard to “improving humankind?”

### **Discussion: Echoes of Scientific Salvation** 20 minutes [30 minutes]

Ask:

- What echoes of “scientific salvation” are still present in our public debates—religious, ethical, and political? (Prompt: immigration, health care, reproductive rights, programs to reduce or alleviate poverty (e.g., WIC, Head Start), education reform, the right to die.) Are there any modern forms of eugenics?
- In what ways is our congregation involved with any of these broader public debates?
- What is the subtext of our congregations’ commitment or response to any of these issues, in terms of class? In other words, who do we help? How? Why?

### **Closing Discussion and Reading** 15 minutes [15 minutes]

Read aloud the final quotation on Handout 3. Explain that it is from Skinner’s book *A Religion for Greatness*, written after World War II, and repudiates his earlier position.

Lead a discussion:

- How is the history told in *Elite* pertinent to our selves, our congregation?
- Where do you find your own experience and internal tensions (ethical, political, and religious) in this chapter?
- What are next steps we will take to address class issues in our congregation?

Thank participants.

## HANDOUT 3: Quotations

1. “Birth control or even sterilization were ways to control indiscriminate breeding... When Clarence Russell Skinner, the great Universalist social activist, published *The Social Implication of Universalism*, he declared, ‘The new enthusiasm for humanity readily pictures a time when through eugenics, education, friendship, play, worship, and work, the criminal will be no more, because the misdirection or the undevelopment of human nature will cease.’” (p. 91)

2. “Charles Francis Potter, a Unitarian minister who quit the Unitarian movement, was the first president of the Euthanasia Society of America... Potter was also a signer of the Humanist Manifesto of 1933... This coming faith had to include, incorporate, and intelligently use science, instead of fighting it as orthodox religion would. ...

While Potter declared that euthanasia relieved suffering and empowered individual with some control and choice over this most trying part of life, he argued that it could serve social purposes as well. In 1936 he wrote that handicapped infants and the incurably insane and mentally retarded out to be mercifully executed.” (pp. 93-94)

3. “[Francis Greenwood Peabody] ...tried to combine social science methodology, photography, and his religious faith to make substantive changes in society... There is a ‘general struggle,’ he said, ‘for the existence of two types of civilization, one dominated by an interest in the development of the individual, the other characterized by a concern for the social order.’... He approved of the individualistic, free enterprise system, and even, to some extent, the accumulation of wealth, but there was a duty that went with wealth.” (p. 99)

4. “Science says to religion: ‘Your goodness is not wholly good if it be not true.’ Will religion have the courage to say to science, ‘Your truth is not wholly true if it be not good?’” — Clarence Russell Skinner, in *A Religion for Greatness* (quoted in *Elite*, p. 102)