

Unitarian Universalists: People of the Books

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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I chose the title *People of the Books* because we do not take our inspiration from one source. Our statement of principles and sources states explicitly: “The living tradition which we share draws from many sources” and that we are “Grateful for the religious pluralism which enriches and ennobles our faith, we are inspired to deepen our understanding and expand our vision.” Today I am going to weave a story for you on the development of church libraries and how that is reflected in our own history here at Olinda. Showing how books played such an important role in our history.

I have been studying church libraries for some time now and have an article in the works around a survey that I conducted of UU Church libraries in Canada and the US. Of the many sources I have consulted, I have drawn much on this book *The Library: A Fragile History* by Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen (vaduven). This recent book has charted the history of libraries in the Western world.

By the time of Jesus, books and libraries were well established and libraries played a key role in the lives of the earliest Christian believers. “The apostles and their followers, many of whom led itinerant lives, had small travelling books collections: ... These were by all accounts practical libraries made up predominantly of the books of the Old Testament and of the writings which were later to be canonized as the New Testament.” (p32). We know that the Judeo-Christian heritage from which we come is steeped in textual analysis.

I’ll skip quickly along to Charlemagne, the Holy Roman Emperor from 800-814, who makes another huge step in the development of church libraries. There was a lot of “concern with the accuracy of language and its proper usage by clergy, administrators and subjects.” (p38-40). Charlemagne set about ensuring that there were books with the official dogma, obviously all in Latin, distributed throughout his empire which at this time encompassed most of Europe. This places church libraries as being the cornerstone of churches as libraries became core to churches functioning. At this time in church history, churches were linked to monasteries which as time wore on turned into cathedral chapters and schools and eventually into universities.

The next big event in this abbreviated history is of course the invention of the printing press and Martin Luther’s 95 Theses and his prolific publishing which led to Protestantism and a torrent of printing. “By 1550, one hundred years after the invention of printing, Europe was awash with books. More books had been created in the last hundred years than in the whole history of mankind to this point. (p.123).

The fighting between Protestants and Catholics also brought the purging and indeed much book burning of many titles from church libraries. The UK in 1550 made it illegal to even possess “what they deemed superstitious books” and 1559 saw Pope Paul IV issue the first papal index of prohibited books. Indeed, Michael Servetus, who as a nontrinitarian we claim as one of our forebearers was burned at the stake in 1553 as a heretic and he was burned on a pile of his own books.

The printing press and subsequent increase in books, also brought an increase in book ownership, especially among the rising class of professionals which covered lawyers, civil servants, doctors, and, unsurprisingly, ministers. “In the 17th century Dutch Republic, it was not unusual for ministers to own hundreds, if not thousands of volumes. These libraries were often larger than the local institutional libraries and functioned as private as well as communal collections.” (p.127). The role of church libraries continued to grow in these early days of prolific printed books serving the role of public library well before there was any notion or conception of public libraries. In fact, “ministers had such a deep connection to books that their libraries were on average, slightly larger than those of other learned professionals, despite a lower income.” (p134-5).

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries the idea arose that libraries were for the community. And where did they look to create this – parish churches. They did this because they were a regularly used space available to the whole community. (p.183). In Europe, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries saw the height of the church library success as a defacto public library, though it depended in the interest of the local minister and school master. (p.189).

As Europeans came to North America, they brought books with them. The first library was brought by Christopher Columbus’ son. Books were so central that “Even those who had rejected European society, like the Pilgrim Fathers, clung to books and libraries as essential makers of their civilisation.” (p.162). “Throughout the first century of colonial America, the most important collections were those assembled by the leading preachers.” (p.169). And we see again the role of the church in books and libraries and the role of books and libraries in churches.

This is not all a rosy picture as evidenced by the book burning. Books were also used as an important weapon in efforts at converting the indigenous population, with some going so far as translating books, especially the Bible and theology into indigenous languages. As we unlearn and decolonize our thinking of how history has been told, we know that the first Europeans overlooked, ignored and willfully destroyed the literary traditions of the cultures they found here, print or oral. For instance, the Aztecs had a large and rich tradition of books and libraries, equal at least what was happening in Europe and it was all burned (p.163). Another is the degradation and wilful destruction of oral traditions that we are now hearing about through the Truth and Reconciliation process we are undertaking in Canada. It was also seen with enslavers who felt that literacy was a dangerous path towards subversion and ultimately liberation (p.27). As important and uplifting as I find books and the European history around them, it is important that we know the whole of history and recognize that there are many ways of knowing and recording that

knowledge. And that these reverberations still exist to today. It is a sad fact that books and libraries have been used in both discrimination and as a weapon throughout history

As we get to the 19th century, we start to see libraries opening up to the general public (though mainly the general white public), some were public libraries, but many were subscription libraries a precursor to the truly public library. And in this we can see the influence of Unitarians on their development. In Manchester, England, the Unitarian Minister Rev. William Gaskell (husband of novelist Elizabeth Gaskell), played a pivotal role in the development of The Portico subscription library. In Newcastle-upon-Tyne, the Unitarian Minister Rev. William Turner played a key role in establishing the Literary and Philosophical Society and its Library in that city. Both of these libraries are still in existence today.

In the US, there were many literary and library developments, not the least of which were some prolific Unitarian authors. Boston played a defining role in how libraries developed in the US and as Boston is also the centre of Unitarianism, there are many connections and influences. In fact, in New England, which has a strong tradition of both Unitarianism and Universalism, public libraries saw its strongest appeal. I am not saying public libraries are due to UUs, but we played a role. And that commitment to books and libraries traces down to Olinda, its formation and its having a library.

If one is looking for UU libraries, there are two main collections. One is at the Meadville Lombard Theological School which has a library and archives that were founded in 1844. The other is the Andover Harvard Library now called the Harvard Divinity Library. This has roots back to 1816 and is the home to many UU collections. In 1967 it received the UUA's Historical Library and in 1975, the Universalist Historical Society's Library.

I am going to talk here briefly about the UU presses. And it will be fairly brief as I have not spent a lot of time investigating this nor found any comprehensive history.

There was a Universalist Publishing House which existed from 1862 to 1962. And we have several of their publications in the church, primarily hymnals that they produced. They ceased functions after the merger and I did not discover what happened, though presumably they were incorporated into Beacon Press, as the red hymnal moves to that publisher.

The Beacon Press was founded officially in 1854, though it had been operating since 1825 in an unofficial manner. For many years, the UUA (and before that the American Unitarian Association) was located on Beacon Hill in Boston and has only recently moved away from that location. The first logo of the Press developed around 1900 paid homage to being on Beacon Hill. From the press' history they note that Beacon Hill got its name in 1634 "when Beacon Hill was sixty feet taller and much wilder, [there was] a primitive tar bucket was suspended from a pole on top of this hill. If colonial Bostonians needed to be warned of enemies approaching by land or by sea, the bucket was set aflame and hoisted up the pole. The idea of shedding light to warn of imminent dangers was appealing to Eliot [the AUA President from 1900-1927] and the association."

We know why Beacon Press was founded and I personally think that we could assume that the Universalists has similar reasonings. Beacon Press was created to:

1. Send books where ministers and missionaries could not yet travel
2. Explain, promote and defend Unitarian thought
3. Publish works others wouldn't
4. Make money off of Unitarian authors

Skinner House books by the way started as a specific imprint of Beacon Press that was established in 1975. It was named after Rev. Clarence Skinner a Universalist Minister and historian.

We see a direct connection in the existence of these presses to Olinda's existence. I will read this passage taken from Louise Fould's *Universalists in Ontario* (p77-78).

Writing in 1889, J.C. Barrows, Clerk of the church, gave this account of Michael Fox's role in bringing Universalism to Olinda:

Barrows wrote:

The society whose history I would place on record... has reached its summit of influence in the face of relentless opposition. ... About 30 years ago there came into the possession of Michael G. Fox a copy of *The Gospel Advocate*, then printed at Utica. It set on flame his whole soul, and he decided upon a more thorough investigation of the principles of Universalism. In this effort he was ably seconded by his wife, a lady of wide readings, and one possessed of a retentive memory. An order for \$20 worth of books was at once sent to the publishers of Universalist literature who, fully appreciative of Mr. Fox's motive, duplicated the order, thus sending \$40 worth of books for \$20. Together husband and wife began the study of Bible Universalism; and so thorough was the course that each became an able defender of its clear principles, while its practical tendencies were strikingly exemplified and honoured by their unostentatious, virtuous, and benevolent lives.

Mr. Fox had been educated in the Orthodox faith, as had also Mrs. F., and it seems a happy coincidence that their minds should simultaneously call in question those barbaric ideas which obscured their mental horizons. The Baptists at this time were predominant, and when it became known, as it speedily did, that Universalist literature was being introduced into their midst, they, with renewed vigor, sought to counteract its influence by a more literal presentation of an endless hell and kindred doctrines. Mr. Fox was assailed as the devil's emissary, and he, more than all others, was pointed out as the man who would suffer the most intense pain in the hottest corner of hell. The most opprobrious epithets were applied to him, while his very presence at that time was sufficient to appal the more credulous.

In the midst of all, however, Mr. Fox and his wife retained a perfect composure of mind, and were ever ready to defend their new-born faith as a precious inheritance vouchsafed by the loving kindness of God. They never hid their life under a bushel, but kept it bright until others, seeing the good way, followed. And thus the one *Gospel Advocate* falling casually into the hands of an

individual proved the means whereby the tide of religious sentiment in that locality was turned.”
(end quote)

And so, books and the foundation of Olinda are inextricably linked. What I haven't looked for yet in our archives is when the library is mentioned, when it was formed, how it was talked about, etc. It may have been so informal as to not have made it into the written record. Certainly, I have vague memories of when the parsonage was still in use that the front room contained supplies and a library. And of course, when it was named after Louise Foulds our church historian, among her many roles.

During the 20th century, church libraries start to systemize and organize. Books about how to manage a church library proliferate and associations form geared to supporting church libraries. In those writings, we see people working to define what church libraries are. J.L. White says, “Church libraries are not intended to be research collections, nor little public libraries... They contain religious resources to support their parent institutions much of which are too specialized to be appropriate for the public library collection.” And R.C. Miller defines it succinctly saying they are there to assist congregants in “their personal quest for spiritual growth.” Even within those descriptions, there is still plenty of scope for churches to decide what they want their library to be.

At Olinda, our library is typical in size and organizational structure and as shown in the survey that I conducted to UU church libraries. The oldest book in our library is titled *Sermons I Have Preached to Young People* by Sidney Weston from 1931. The oldest book in the building that I have identified so far is from 1884 by L.O. Emerson titled *Song Greeting for High Schools*.

We have a wide range of material including the *Bhagavad Gita*, Tom Harpur's books, and *Living Buddha, Living Christ* by Thich Nhat Hanh. Many of the books we have were published by Beacon Press or Skinner House books. They continue to be what they promised, shedding light to warn of danger. As a side note, though we do not have these in our library, we played an important role in The Pentagon Papers. These papers revealed the actual scope of the US involvement in Vietnam. And when no other publisher would touch them, Beacon Press were backed by the UUA, which not only supported them, but also provided financial backing to bring them to print them.

In 2023 we added three books to the Library:

- *A Fire at the Center: Solidarity, Whiteness, and Becoming a Water Protector*, a memoir by the UU minister Rev. Van Fossan chronicling her involvement with the events when the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe undertook a series of legal and water protection actions to prevent the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline. This was published by Skinner House Books.
- *A Master Class on Being Human: A Black Christian and a Black Secular Humanist on Religion, Race, and Justice* in which authors Brad Braxton and Anthony Pinn representing

two traditions engage in dialogue instead of fighting each other, they talk with, listen to, and learn from one another. This was published by Beacon Press.

- *The Rough Side of the Mountain: Black Women's Ministries in Unitarian Universalism*, a collection edited by Rahman that explores the unique journeys of Black Unitarian Universalist clergywomen, celebrating their wisdom, resilience, and contributions within and beyond Unitarian Universalism. Published by Skinner House Books.

We also have books by our own members and ministers. We have Rev Stewart Moore's books, Irvine Barat's poetry, and of course, Louise Foulds. Olinda has published several histories. The first is this small book printed in 1954. One of the most interesting things about this is that one of the surviving founders reviewed it and wrote a lengthy letter of her recollections of those early days which we still have.

For the first edition of *Universalists in Ontario*, Louise did an enormous amount of research and work assembling the documents of this church. And was just as thorough for the Second Edition. Recently, we have an addition covering the first two decades of the 21st century done by my Mom. We also have *Guarding Sacred Embers: Reflections on Canadian Unitarian Universalist History* which contains Louise's 1983 Canadian Unitarian Universalist History Society Lecture and an essay by Rev. Christine Hillman entitled *Unitarian Universalists: Who are we?* We have other churches histories and plenty of Canadian UU History including works by Margaret Gooding, Phillip Hewett, Mark Morisson-Reed, and Fred Cappaccino. As well a host of other topics.

As we are well into the 21st century and have seen information be transformed, and weathered the pandemic, we are entering a new phase in the history of church libraries. A phase that I believe still sees them play an important role. To that end, as I have done this research and I became chair of the library and archives committee, I have been spending a lot of time thinking about our tradition at Olinda for preserving our heritage and ensuring the Library is well cared for. After the untimely death of Rev. Hillman, her family gave the congregation her library. An act which sustains the long tradition of church libraries and ministers' relationships to them. I have started conversations with the committee about what we could do with this donation, to care for it, and make it available to the congregation. You might notice us after the service having some discussions.

Going back to the earliest roots of Judeo-Christianity, libraries and books have been important and valued and I think will continue into the future, including here at Olinda.