

# LISTEN AND LEARN

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## Beauty, Embodiment, and Stewardship: Theological Libraries and Theological Ecology

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**ABSTRACT** Many faith traditions affirm a profound connection between physicality and spirituality. Similarly, libraries, even while facilitating sublime intellectual connections between authors and readers, have done so, and to an extent continue to do so, as physical places and through the physical medium of books. Given these connections, it is perhaps not surprising that theological libraries can serve as a nexus for exploring the relationship between the physical and the spiritual, between the largely incorporeal acts of intellectual analysis and spiritual contemplation and the physical ecology in which such acts occur and the physical (and digital) media that make them possible. As we have become increasingly aware of the fragility of our physical environment, such connections have taken on greater significance, both as a topic for intellectual analysis and a guide for faithful praxis. This paper offers further consideration of these themes and explores ways in which theological libraries, our collections and services, can both model and further good stewardship.

## SPEAKERS

- David Kriegh, Library Director, St. Patrick's Seminary & University
- Sandy Shapoval, Dean of the Library and Research Services, Phillips Seminary
- Alex Strohschein, Circulation Coordinator, John Richard Allison Library, Regent College

These three presenters, representing differing faith traditions (all broadly Christian), offered a twelve-to-thirteen-minute snapshot of their faith tradition's theological understanding of the natural world and how this informs their work as theological librarians and their perception of the work of the library, both as a physical space and as an expression or embodiment of a particular theological understanding. We then had a few minutes for questions and answers.

## Catholic Teaching on the Environment

David Kriegh, Library Director, St. Patrick's Seminary & University

### A Top-Down Approach

From its very foundations, the Catholic Church addresses social issues in a top-down fashion to address a concern that progresses from the bottom up. In this case, the concern of environmental degradation and pollution serves as the "heresy" that the Church addresses in its Magisterial documents, which in turn guide the responses of the local Church hierarchies and the institutions that serve them. The Gellert Memorial Library, which serves St. Patrick's Seminary & University, the theological school of the Archdiocese of San Francisco, therefore carries out these instructions from the Holy See as part of its organizational being. Therefore, when exploring Catholic social teachings on the environment, it is best to start from the top and work down.

### Who is the "Green Pope"?

In 2015, to great acclaim both within and outside the Catholic Church, Pope Francis promulgated his second, and, to date, most recent encyclical, *Laudato si'*, "On Care for Our Common Home." On the surface, this appeared to be a breakthrough by the Church and a new

direction by a progressive pope. However, concern for the well-being of the planet was not invented by Pope Francis. Rather, the concern for the environment has long been part of the Church's greater "pro-life" stance for which it is well-known.

Pope John Paul II was actually the first pope to devote an entire publication to the subject of the environment. On the first day of 1990, he delivered the message for the World Day of Peace entitled "The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility," which emphasized the moral dimension of the problem and the need for a concerted response from all people as part of a common responsibility.

Pope Benedict XVI was the first pope to address the environment in an encyclical. The fourth chapter of his 2009 encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, "On Integral Human Development," discusses the responsibilities of humanity for care of the environment. Unlike his predecessor's brief and directed statement made twenty years prior, Pope Benedict's message is far wider. Furthermore, Benedict cites numerous sources, from the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus to the Second Vatican Council, to underscore that this is not a new problem. As with previous Magisterial documents, the work of the three most recent popes is not inventing, but clarifying, the Church's response to the challenges faced by the whole planet.

Therefore, while Pope Francis has done tremendous work to raise the cause of protecting our environment, he clearly stands on the shoulders of his two predecessors. The title of the "Green Pope" may be shared by all three.

### **Response in the United States**

The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) is the ecclesial body that represents the Church in the United States at a national level. Typically, they sharpen the focus of what comes from the Magisterium and apply it to a national context. In 1991, they issued the pastoral statement "Renewing the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action on Environment in Light of Catholic Social Teaching," a document directly derived from John Paul II's 1990 World Day of Peace message. In 2001, the USCCB ratified and issued a statement prepared by the Committee on Doctrine and the Committee on Science and Human Values entitled "Global Climate Change: A Plea for Dialogue, Prudence, and the Common Good." This document

expounds further what had been laid out in the 1991 pastoral statement and makes special mention of the need to overcome political polarization to address a common concern. The document is particularly concerned with the relationship between the environment and science, commending and upholding the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), while condemning the “weaponization” of this science to advance political agendas.

The USCCB also creates national programs designed to address these issues. Under the umbrella of the Department of Justice, Peace, and Human Development, they formed the Environmental Justice Program. Thanks to this organization, the USCCB has compiled a comprehensive resource list on their website under the larger heading of Human Life and Dignity. Again, the Church considers care for the environment to be an integral part of the greater scope of human dignity, intertwined with many other issues rather than standing apart as an isolated problem.

### **Local Response at the Seminary and the Library**

Although many steps removed from the USCCB and the Holy See, St. Patrick’s Seminary and the Gellert Memorial Library seek to honor care for the environment as they would any other important social teaching. In fact, the most concrete steps, though small, happen at the local level.

St. Patrick’s Seminary has taken some specific steps in caring for the earth that supports it. It has reduced its power consumption by replacing lighting with more energy-efficient alternatives. By partnering with local government and utilities, these initiatives have paid for themselves. Motion-activated lighting in the corridors has also helped ease power consumption. Being in California, water consumption is also a concern. Although blessed with ample well water, the seminary has taken steps to install drought-resistant landscaping instead of repairing and expanding aging lawns. Finally, thanks to sorting a portion of its waste into compost and recycling, the seminary grows food on the property.

The Gellert Memorial Library helps in its own way. Besides being a major part of the seminary’s physical plant and benefitting from the above programs, the library studies its own processes and how they impact the environment. For example, we help control power

consumption and paper consumption by making environmentally aware decisions when programming the settings of our lab computers and printers. We also collect numerous titles on the relationship between theology and ecology, from both a Catholic and a general Christian perspective. These titles were highlighted in a prominent part of the library this past summer.

### **Conclusion**

Needless to say, the steps taken above by the seminary and library are limited and small, but these are important beginning steps. Just as theological libraries must work to honor the expectations set up by accrediting bodies such as ATS, Catholic libraries must strive to meet the expectations set within the hierarchy of the Church as faithful stewards of ancient traditions and promoters of the greater sphere of human life and dignity.

## Unitarian Universalism: Ecotheology and Environmental Justice

Sandy Shapoval, Dean of the Library and Research Services, Phillips Seminary

I have been asked to speak to the ecotheological and environmental justice aspects of my faith tradition: Unitarian Universalism. My seminary is not UU—Phillips Theological Seminary is historically Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). But it is ecumenical, and Unitarian Universalists do earn theological degrees here. This panel opportunity has inspired me to provide leadership at my seminary to see what environmental improvements we can make, starting by looking at the Unitarian Universalists Association's array of programs.

In this presentation I will introduce you to a snapshot of the UUA's theological practice of engaging in the physical salvation of our "now" world and its connection with shaping justice for all people and creatures. I am not a specialist in ecotheology by any means, nor can I speak officially on behalf of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA). But I am a Unitarian Universalist, and I have had a life-long concern for off-setting the human impact on nature. I began bird rescues and rehabilitation as a young girl and have moved in and out

of environmental activism throughout my almost sixty years. Ecotheology presents a path that unifies my natural inclinations to protect wildlife, and by extension the earth, and at the same time indulges my theological habit.

American Unitarianism began in the late 1700s as a movement within New England congregationalist churches, whose unifying themes were aversions to the dogma of the Trinity, the infallibility of scripture, and salvation from eternal punishment by means of Jesus' death.<sup>1</sup>

American Universalism emerged roughly at the same time. It had creedal beginnings with its statement of belief "that in God's love and forbearance, all souls will be saved."<sup>2</sup>

The Transcendentalist tradition was an early thread in New England Unitarianism led by Ralph Waldo Emerson, and developed by others including Henry David Thoreau and Theodore Parker. According to UU writer Sheri Prud'homme, Transcendentalists "saw the created world as an expression of the mind of God, each part reflecting the order and the beauty of the whole."<sup>3</sup> Early Unitarian theology saw nature as spiritually authoritative, viewing nature and science as integrated into a reality of Love. Ralph Waldo Emerson states, "[The world] is, therefore, to us, the present expositor of the divine mind."<sup>4</sup>

Universalist theology of the time held the idea of universal salvation; there is no fickle God who created us just to "perhaps condemn us, perhaps not." God is a loving God and does not create in order to punish or abandon. Drawing on scientific learning, contemporary universalists generally maintain that all life has a common destiny in the presence of a benevolent divinity. This too fosters our spirituality of holding creation and our earth home as sacred. We are all on this earth, now, together, and though we will pass from this life, we are responsible to and for each other.

The two threads officially united in 1961 to form the UUA. Non-creedal now, the association has a set of widely shared tenets of faith summed up in our Principles and Purposes.

Unlike some Christian ecotheologies that might constrict their hermeneutics through a fairly tight and traditionally systematic lens, UUs, by virtue of their position of deriving divine authority from more than Judeo-Christianity, are able to interpret ecotheology based on a multiplicity of authorities we call our Six Sources.<sup>5</sup> The first of these authorities is "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and

wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to forces which create and uphold life.”<sup>6</sup>

In addition to our bounteous set of theological authorities, we affirm seven principles, or sets of values, three of which relate directly to environmental justice. “We affirm the respect for the inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity, and compassion in human relation; and the independent web of all existence of which we are a part.”<sup>7</sup> These values deepen the divine cross-section of justice and respect. UU orientation lives in opposition to the idea that earth’s purpose is to provide material exclusively for human use and seeks to fight the negative impact of environmental degradation on economically and politically marginalized communities.

UUs and process theologians have an overlap. Unitarian Universalist Charles Hartshorne, who worked to render Alfred North Whitehead’s process philosophy into process theology, is seen as foundational to the movement.<sup>8</sup> Process theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki states: “We are convinced that everything is dynamically interconnected; that everything matters; that everything has an effect.”<sup>9</sup>

Sheri Prud’homme states that UU theology is similar to other ecotheologies in that it “resists the impulse to separate humanity into ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys,’ the ‘pure’ and the ‘impure.’ Instead it asks us as Unitarian Universalists to face the ways we are all implicated in the systems of exploitation, oppression, and destruction that we work to dismantle in our environmental justice efforts.”<sup>10</sup>

In summary, UUs are “here, now-on-earth” focused. As Henry David Thoreau stated, “One world at a time.”<sup>11</sup> We have historically been oriented towards orthopraxis as opposed to orthodoxy. Living in supportive community with all creation becomes a practice for UUs.

The UUA began making social witness statements in the area of climate and environmental justice in 1962. The list of statements and actions issued by the UUA provides a walk through the history of environmental issues: human population impact on both earth and justice, the Alaskan pipeline, nuclear power, carcinogenic toxicity, solar energy, hazardous waste, Earth Day, responsible consumption, Gulf Coast relief, and much more.<sup>12</sup>

UUA president Susan Frederick-Gray states in her introduction to the UUA’s comprehensive climate and environmental justice program: “Our faith as Unitarian Universalists compels us to create climate justice.”<sup>13</sup>

The association has formalized multiple paths for members to engage in environmental justice action. I will highlight some of the current ones:<sup>14</sup>



- **Green Sanctuary Program**
  - This program, created in 1989, assists congregations in achieving certification through four areas of focus: environmental justice, spiritual connection, religious education, and sustainable living.
  - Twenty-five percent of congregations are accredited.



- **UU Ministry for Earth**
  - Established in 1989, it aims to make UUism's seventh principle more central to members, congregations, and the Association.
  - It provides a forum for discussion and serves as a central source of material for study, religious education, and worship.



- **Create Climate Justice Net**
  - Create Climate Justice Net is an organizing hub designed to catalyze networking and community building.
  - It was created to give UU climate and environmental justice activists and coalition partners a valuable tool for education, collaboration, and organizing.



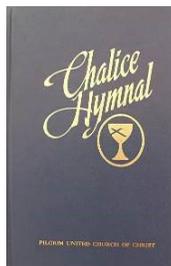
- **Ethical Eating Initiative**
  - This program is derived from a 2011 statement of conscience which “recognizes the moral consequences of our food choices” and “pay[s] attention to the impact of our involvement in the food system.”
  - It offers support through curricula, the Eat Ethically Restaurant Diner’s Guide, UU Food Justice FB Group, and UU Vegetarians and Vegans FB Group.



- **Fossil Fuel Divestment Resolution**
  - This series of actions, originating from the 2014 Business Resolution, gave the UUA a way “to put our money where our values are on this issue.”<sup>15</sup> The actions include:
    - To cease purchasing securities and divest holdings of CT200 companies by 2019 (Carbon Tracker Initiative at [www.carbontracker.org](http://www.carbontracker.org)).
    - To support a swift transition to a clean energy economy, such as renewable energy and energy-efficiency-related securities.
    - To encourage UU congregations and members to “review their congregational and personal investments with a view to taking action to end climate change, such as public divestment of their holdings in fossil fuel companies, supporting shareholder activism designed to end use of fossil fuels, and investment in renewable energy and conservation.”



- **The UU-UNO Climate Justice Initiative**
  - This initiative builds the UU climate change movement through education, advocacy, and collaboration with other climate change voices at the United Nations in order to promote a viable world with mitigated climate change.
    - UUA supports the UN’s seventeen Sustainable Development Goals: 1. No Poverty, 2. Zero Hunger, 3. Good Health and Well-being, 4. Quality Education, 5. Gender Equality, 6. Clean Water and Sanitation, 7. Affordable and Clean Energy, 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth, 9. Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure, 10. Reducing Inequality, 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities, 12. Responsible Consumption and Production, 13. Climate Action, 14. Life Below Water (Aquatic Conservation), 15. Life on Land (Terrestrial Conservation), 16. Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, 17. Partnerships for the Goals.



- **Resources for liturgical response to ecological disasters:**
  - The UUA offers a wide array of literature and materials for worship planning that respond liturgically to ravaged

ecosystems, ruined lives, upended economies, and cruelly killed creatures.

- These resources include prayers, meditations, music, sermons, and resources for entire services.



- **Unitarian Universalist Service Committee**
  - UUSC’s Environmental Justice & Climate Action work focuses on advancing and protecting the rights of populations at risk of climate-forced displacement caused by slow-onset climate impacts.

Let us all practice, however imperfectly.

## Theological Libraries and Ecology— The John Richard Allison Library

Alex Strohschein, Circulation Coordinator, John Richard Allison Library, Regent College

Regent College is a trans-denominational graduate school of theology founded in 1968, located on and affiliated with the University of British Columbia. We have long had a tradition of affirming our call to care for Creation—it is hard not to be impacted by the natural beauty of our surroundings, from the mountains to the north, the waters to the west, and Pacific Spirit Park to the east. Our founding principal, James M. Houston, wrote two articles, “The Environmental Crisis as a Mirror of Our Times” and “Ethics of the Environment, Nature, and Creation,” in 1975. (For some context, Rachel Carson’s extremely influential book *Silent Spring* was published in 1962, and in the conservative Christian

world, Francis Schaeffer released his own ecology book, *Pollution and the Death of Man*, in 1970.)

That same legacy of environmental stewardship has been exemplified by other Regent faculty, most notably Loren and Mary Ruth Wilkinson, who edited *Earthkeeping in the Nineties* and wrote *Caring for Creation in Your Own Backyard*, and who were the long-time instructors for two of Regent's most beloved classes, the "boat" course and the "food" course (courses which continue to be taught). Loren was also the visionary behind a recent documentary produced out of Regent, *Making Peace with Creation*. Another professor, Jonathan R. Wilson, wrote the 2013 book *God's Good World: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Creation*. *Crux*, a journal of Christian thought and opinion that has been published by Regent quarterly since 1979, has also published various articles on the environment, including dedicating an entire 2006 issue to the cause.

Over the years Regent has featured courses on Christians' relationship to Creation, such as Eric Jacobsen's "Theology and the Built Environment," and a 2001 conference called "Creation and Gospel: From the Garden to the Ends of the Earth." Just this past year, Dr. David Clough, a professor of theological ethics, visited Regent to deliver several lectures on Christianity's relationship with animals. Regent has also benefited from local partnerships; many of our students and alumni are actively involved with A Rocha, a Christian environmental stewardship group which now has sites in three provinces. (A fun bit of trivia: Canadian author Margaret Atwood, perhaps best known for her dystopian novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, has described A Rocha as being a lot like the God's Gardeners group that is featured in her dystopian *MaddAddam* trilogy.) Being situated in the Pacific Northwest, Regent reflects the Pacific Northwest ethos, with many of the students, staff, and faculty eager to explore the outdoors and participate in recreational activities such as hiking, biking, and kayaking.

Regent's original library was largely started by donated books. I never saw the old library but I've been told it was becoming increasingly crammed and crowded. The current, 28,500 square-foot John Richard Allison Library was opened in 2007 and it is widely agreed that it is a much more pleasant library than its previous incarnation. It houses a growing collection of over 150,000 monographs, DVDs, video and audiotapes, and over 450 periodical subscriptions in the collection.

The library is named after John Richard Allison, who was a Christian layman and businessman who was keenly interested in missions.

Despite being built underground, the library enjoys an abundance of natural light. Skylights have been placed along the edges of the library, above the study carrels that rim the room. As one walks towards the back half of the library towards the Stacks, one notices two reflective pools on either side of the library. These pools help the library be brighter by reflecting the natural light. The western pool is below a terrace where students help to grow vegetables that are used for Regent's famous "soup Tuesdays," which attract not only members of the Regent community but guests from the wider UBC community as well. (There is a fun, short video entitled "A Wilkinson Theology of Soup" that you can watch on Regent's website.) Another fun sight is seeing the local raccoons come by and hang out around the reflective pools. Occasionally, the library features decorations that help foster a sense of beauty, whether it is real poinsettias at Christmas or, as in the past, artwork adorning our walls. The library does have two significant art pieces: two Proverbs written out in exquisite calligraphy and a sculpture by David Robinson entitled "Font." As my colleague Audrey Williams comments on reactions to the new library, "Most commonly, we as staff hear favorable comments on the brightness and beauty of the building and its art installations. Patrons appreciate the spaciousness of the library, its comfortable seating options, and spacious work carrels. Some value the library as a barrier-free zone; others appreciate it as a green space."<sup>16</sup>

Immediately above the library is the North Garden Plaza. Every day dozens of people enjoy sitting at the Plaza, reading, eating, and chatting with friends. In the past there used to be concerts hosted at the Plaza that attracted audiences. The most notable feature of the plaza is a forty-foot-high wind tower that was the result of a collaborative effort between architect Clive Grout and glass artist Sarah Hall. As Audrey explains, "As an alternative energy source, consistent with Regent's theology of environmental stewardship, the wind tower is designed to provide natural ventilation for the library's radiant heating system. Gracing the outside of the three-sided structure (reflective of the Trinity) is Hall's beautiful glass work. Each day photovoltaic cells soak up and store solar energy used later, at night, to illuminate her work, which encompasses the text of the Lord's Prayer, written in Aramaic."<sup>17</sup>

It is apt to discuss the books we have. As everyone is well aware, there has been much uncertainty and much discussion about how to acquire and manage a library collection in an increasingly digital age. Many theological libraries are adding ebooks to their collections; some schools have shifted entirely in that direction, committed as they are to the admirable mission of educating students without forcing those students to relocate from the communities they are already embedded, established, and invested in.

Aside from our increasing collection of digitized Puritan books, the Allison Library has generally resisted the migration to ebooks, though Regent's affiliation with the University of British Columbia allows our students to have access to UBC's ebook offerings. One of the benefits of retaining physical books is that it fosters a sense of community that is lacking if students are individually reading ebooks at home. The library as a space is a place of community. I have worked at the Allison Library less than a year but I can already detect some of the rhythms of the place: I see the same eager and familiar faces arrive within an hour after the library opens; I know many of our students' preferred spots to study; I scratch my head as I wonder about the guests in our library who I am quite sure are *not* enrolled at Regent but who we welcome nevertheless.

In summary, through classes, publications, planning, and practices, Regent College and the Allison Library have sought to encourage an ethos of environmental stewardship among members of our community so that we and our descendants can (responsibly!) enjoy Creation for years to come.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Unitarianism occurs at the beginning of Christian theological exploration as an alternative to claiming the divinity of Jesus. Early Universalism is seen in Origen's works.
- 2 Edward A. Frost, *With Purpose and Principle: Essays About the Seven Principles of Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1998), 2.

- 3 Sheri Prud'homme, "Ecotheology," in *Justice on Earth: People of Faith Working at the Intersections of Race, Class, and the Environment*, eds. Manish Mishra-Marzetti and Jennifer Nordstrom (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2018), 23.
- 4 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature," in *The Complete Essays and Other Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson* (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 36.
- 5 Patricia Frevert, *Welcome: A Unitarian Universalist Primer* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2009), 5. UU draws from the words and deeds of prophetic women and men, wisdom of world religions, humanist teachings, earth-centered traditional teachings, direct experience of transcending mystery, and Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves.
- 6 Frevert, *Welcome*, 5.
- 7 Frevert, *Welcome*, 4.
- 8 Jay Atkinson, "Charles Hartshorne, Introduction," in *A Documentary History of Unitarian Universalism*, vol 2., ed. Dann McKanan (Boston: Skinner House, 2017), 257.
- 9 Marjorie Hewett Suchokie, "What Is Process Theology? A Conversation with Marjorie," <https://processandfaith.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/what-is-process-theology.pdf>.
- 10 Prud'homme, "Ecotheology," 32.
- 11 "Henry David Thoreau," *Dictionary of Unitarian Universalist Biography*, Unitarian Universalist History & Heritage Society, <http://uudb.org/articles/henrydavidthoreau.html>.
- 12 "Social Justice Statements," UUA, [https://www.uua.org/action/statements?title=&text=&type=All&year=&topic=3471&items\\_per\\_page=50](https://www.uua.org/action/statements?title=&text=&type=All&year=&topic=3471&items_per_page=50).
- 13 Susan Frederick-Gray, "Create Climate Justice with Rev. Susan Frederick-Gray," Unitarian Universalist Association, [www.uua.org](http://www.uua.org).
- 14 The following are all taken from the UUA's website, with their permission.
- 15 Former UUA president Peter Morales.
- 16 Audrey Williams, "The John Richard Allison Library: Regent College, Vancouver, British Columbia," *Theological Librarianship* 5, no. 1 (January 2012), 28.
- 17 Williams, "The John Richard Allison Library," 27.