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Unitarian-Universalists in the United States 1990-2008: Socio-demographic Trends and Religious Patterns

Barry A. Kosmin

Trinity College, barry.kosmin@trincoll.edu

Ariela Keysar

Trinity College, ariela.keysar@trincoll.edu

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**Unitarian-Universalists
in the United States 1990-2008:**

Socio-demographic Trends and Religious Patterns

**A Report Based on the
American Religious Identification Surveys**

Principal Investigators
Barry A. Kosmin & Ariela Keysar



Trinity College
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Unitarian-Universalists in the United States 1990-2008: Socio-demographic Trends and Religious Patterns

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Methodological Note

The American Religious identification Survey (ARIS) 2008 is the third in a landmark time series of large, nationally representative surveys that track changes in the religious loyalties of the U.S. adult population within the 48 contiguous states from 1990 to 2008. The 2001 and 2008 surveys are replicas of the 1990 survey, and are led by the same academic research team using an identical methodology of random-digit-dialed telephone interviews (RDD) and the same unprompted, open-ended key question “What is your religion, if any?” Interviewers did not prompt or offer a suggested list of potential answers. Moreover, the self-description of respondents was not based on whether established religious bodies or institutions considered them to be members. To the contrary, the surveys sought to determine whether the respondents regarded themselves as adherents of a religious community. The surveys tap subjective rather than objective standards of religious identification.

The key religion question is part of an inquiry that also probes a range of socio-demographic, political, social, and life-cycle issues as well as attitudes that add richness to the main findings. These responses reveal the nation’s pattern of religious beliefs, behaviors and belonging. The ARIS 2008 survey was carried out from February through November 2008 and collected answers from 54,461 respondents who were questioned in English or Spanish. ARIS 2001 interviewed 50,281 respondents and the 1990 NSRI interviewed 113,713 respondents. The huge number of cases in these surveys provides unparalleled, in-depth profiles of the social make-up of religious groups and detailed geographical coverage with a high degree of statistical precision and a standard error of under 0.5 percent for the full sample in 2008.

Respondents who identified as Unitarian-Universalists numbered 351 in 1990, 182 in 2001 and 192 in 2008. The population and socio-demographic data presented are restricted to a comparison of 1990 and 2008 in order to offer meaningful and clear findings and analysis of trends over two decades.

The 1990 and 2001 studies were fully analyzed and reported in *One Nation under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society* (1993) and *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans* (2006).¹

¹ Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, *One Nation under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society*, New York, Harmony Press, 1993; Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans*, Ithaca, N.Y., Paramount Market Publishing, 2006.

Part I

POPULATION

A. POPULATION SIZE & GEOGRAPHY

ARIS estimates that the Unitarian-Universalist identifying (UUA) adult population was 463,000 in 1990 and 586,000 in 2008. This represents an increase of 123,000 adherents or 27%. This growth is similar to the total U.S. population growth of 30% over this time period.

This is not the only way in which the UUA adherents mirror the larger U.S. population. The UUA has historical roots in the Northeast, especially in New England. Thus, the regional distribution bias in 1990 shown in Table 1 is not unexpected: about a quarter of all UUA adherents lived in the Northeast even if a plurality in the West was already evident. By 2008 the proportion of UUA adherents in the West was even greater. The corollary of the concentration in the West is under-representation in the South. Though, even if the UUA is under-represented in the South, there is also a minor increase in adherence in the region, suggesting that the UUA have similar patterns of migration to the sunbelt as the U.S. population: moving from the Northeast and Midwest to the West and South.

Table 1. UUA Adult Population by region 1990 & 2008

| | 1990 | | | 2008 | | |
|--------------|----------------|-------------|--------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------------|
| | UUA | Percent UUA | USA | UUA | Percent UUA | USA |
| Total | 463,000 | 100 | 175,440,000 | 586,000 | 100 | 228,182,000 |
| Northeast | 121,000 | 26 | 21% | 111,000 | 19 | 18% |
| Midwest | 106,000 | 23 | 24% | 101,000 | 17 | 22% |
| South | 99,000 | 21 | 35% | 139,000 | 24 | 37% |
| West | 138,000 | 30 | 20% | 236,000 | 40 | 23% |

Part II

VITAL STATISTICS

A. GENDER

The gender composition of the total adult U.S. population had a slight bias towards women (52 women to 48 men) in 1990 and in 2008. UAA adherents, like most religious groups in the U.S., has a marked female bias. Still, the proportion of women to men among UUA adherents narrowed over the two decades from 62% women to 38% men in 1990 to 59% women to 41% men in 2008.

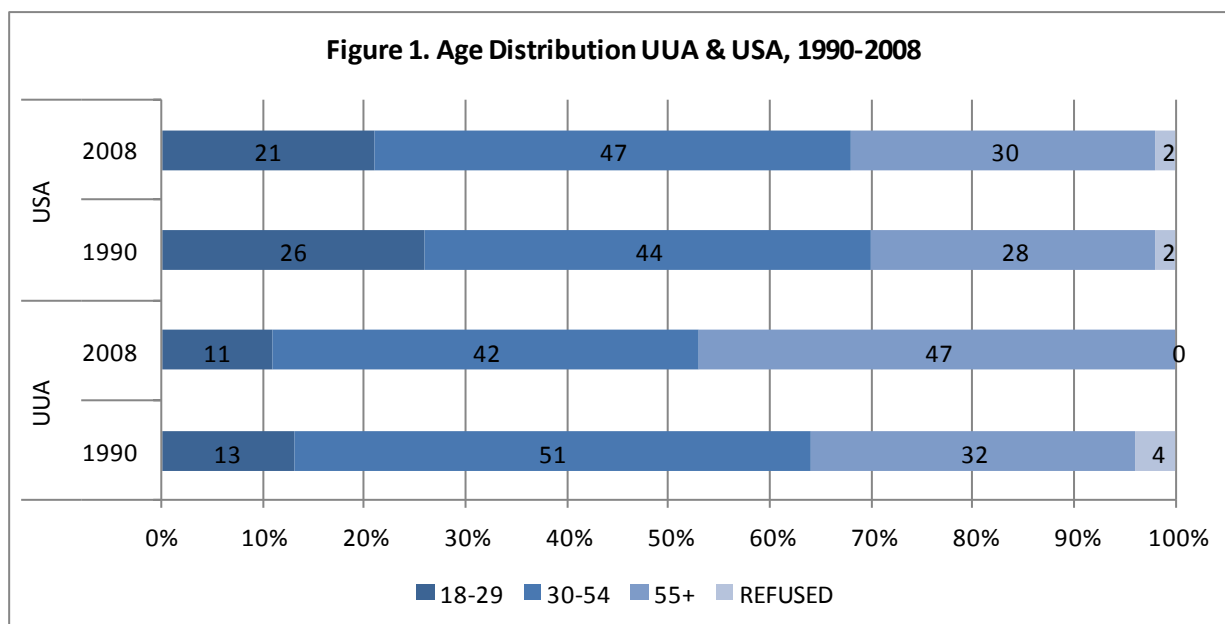
Table 2. UUA Percentage Gender Distribution 1990 & 2008

| | 1990 | | 2008 | |
|----------|------|-----|------|-----|
| | UUA | USA | UUA | USA |
| % Male | 38 | 48 | 41 | 48 |
| % Female | 62 | 52 | 59 | 52 |

B. AGE

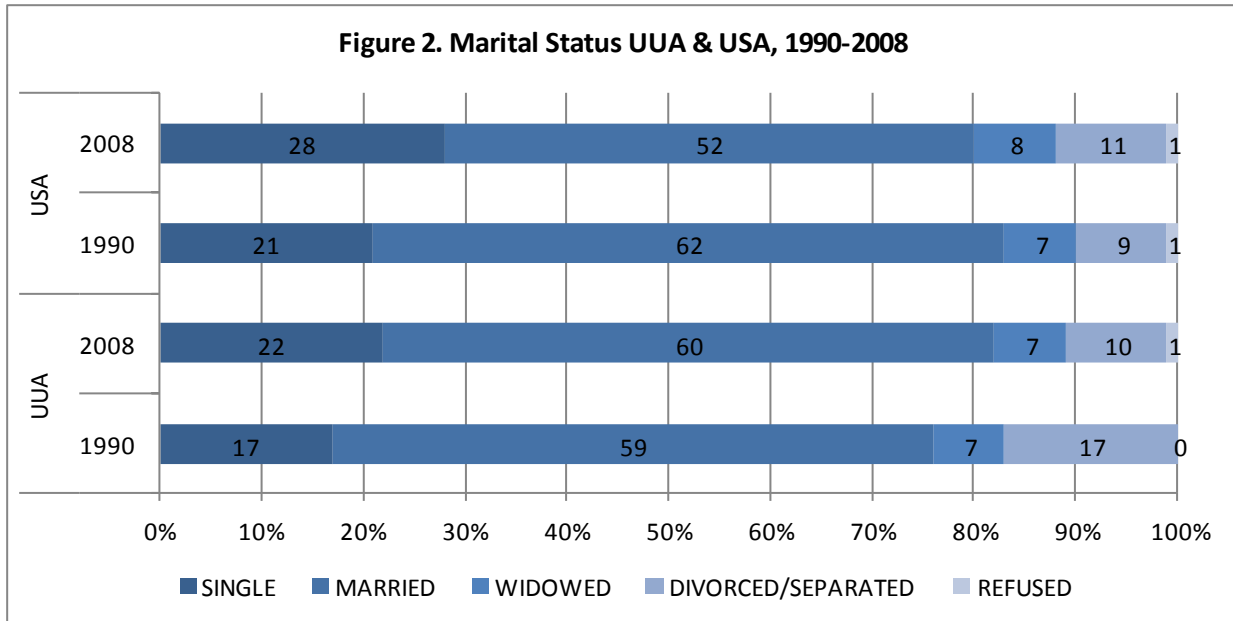
The median age of U.S. adults in 1990 was 40 years and it increased to 44 years in 2008, showing a pattern of aging among the general U.S. population. The median age of the UUA shows that it is aging at a faster pace. In 1990 the median age of UUA adherents was 44 years. By 2008 the AAU median age increased to 52 years, 8 years older than the median U.S. adult in the same year.

Figure 1 presents the UUA population by three age categories in 1990 and 2008. The most important finding is that the older segment of the population, those over the age of 55 years, have increased from just under one-third in 1990 to nearly half of the UUA adherents (47%) in 2008.



C. MARITAL STATUS

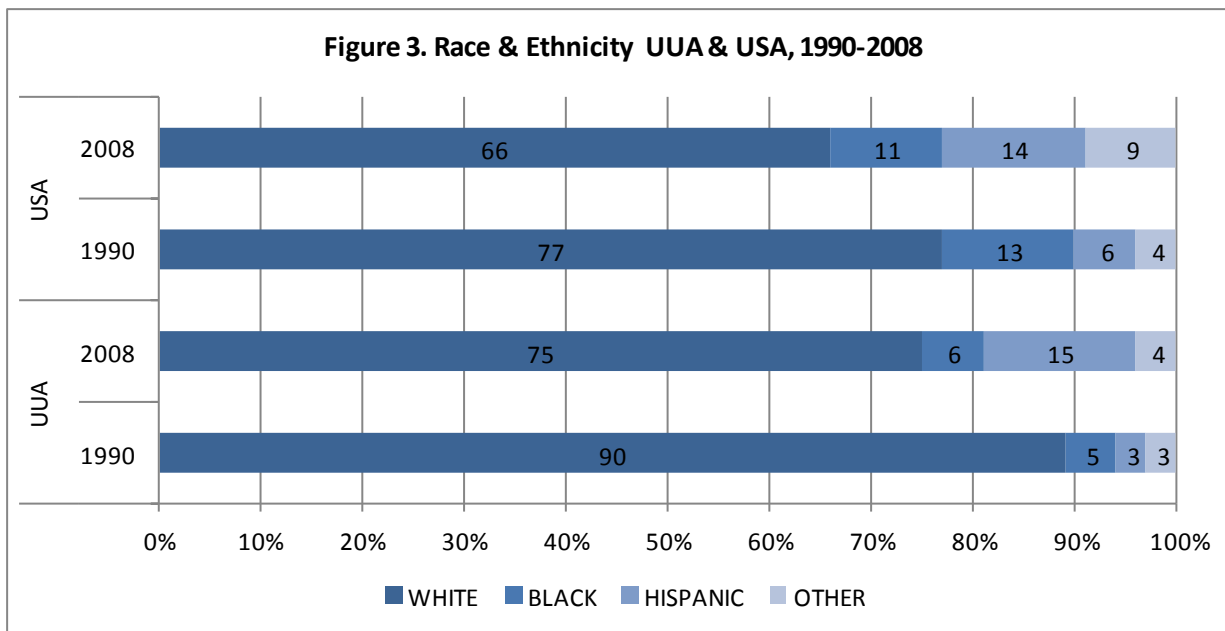
Figure 2 shows that compared to the national pattern of marital status, the UUA population was more unique in 1990 than in 2008. The UUA had nearly twice the proportion of divorced and separated people in 1990 but reflected the national norm in 2008.



The proportion of UUA single-never married persons was below the national rate in both 1990 and 2008, which is probably related to the UUA’s older age distribution. However, the percentage of UUA married people was similar in both years while the U.S. national percentage fell.

D. RACE & ETHNICITY

The UUA population has followed the national trend and become more racially diverse as shown in Figure 3. Between 1990 and 2008 the share of Non-Hispanic whites among UUA adherents decreased from 90% to 75%, largely in part to an increase in its Hispanic population. Nevertheless compared to the national population the UUA is under-represented among the black, Asian and Other race groups.

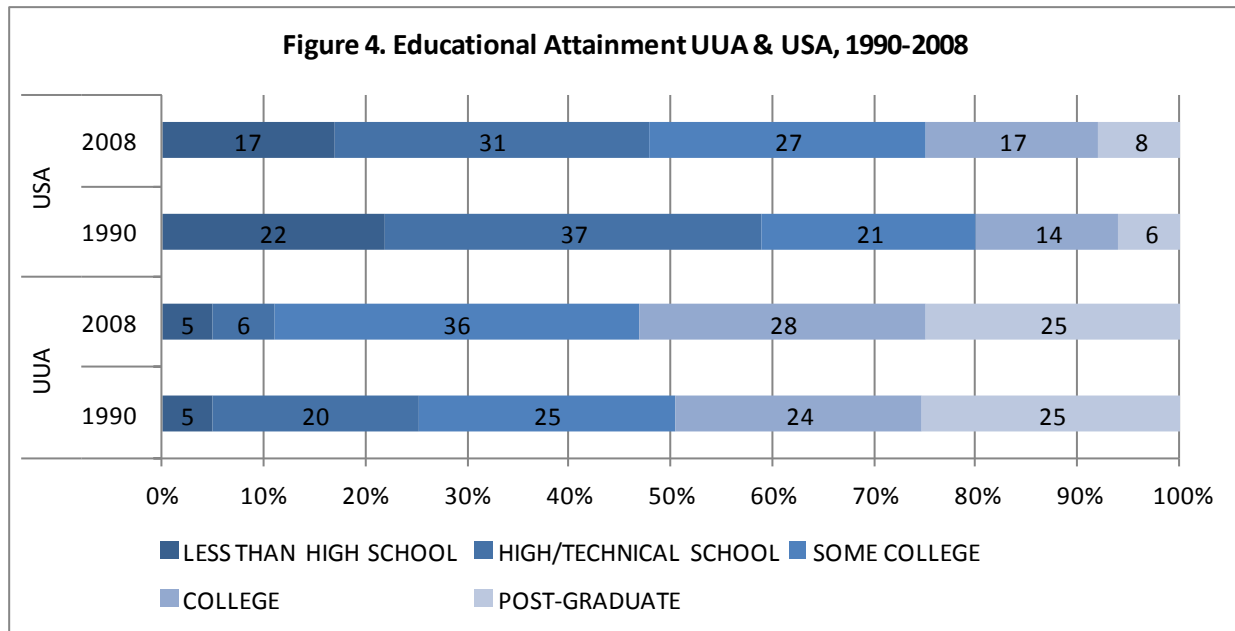


Part III

SOCIAL & ECONOMIC PATTERNS

A. EDUCATION

Compared to the U.S. general population, the UUA population is highly educated. What is especially noteworthy in Figure 4 is the high proportion of UUA adherents with post-graduate qualifications which is three times the national percentage.



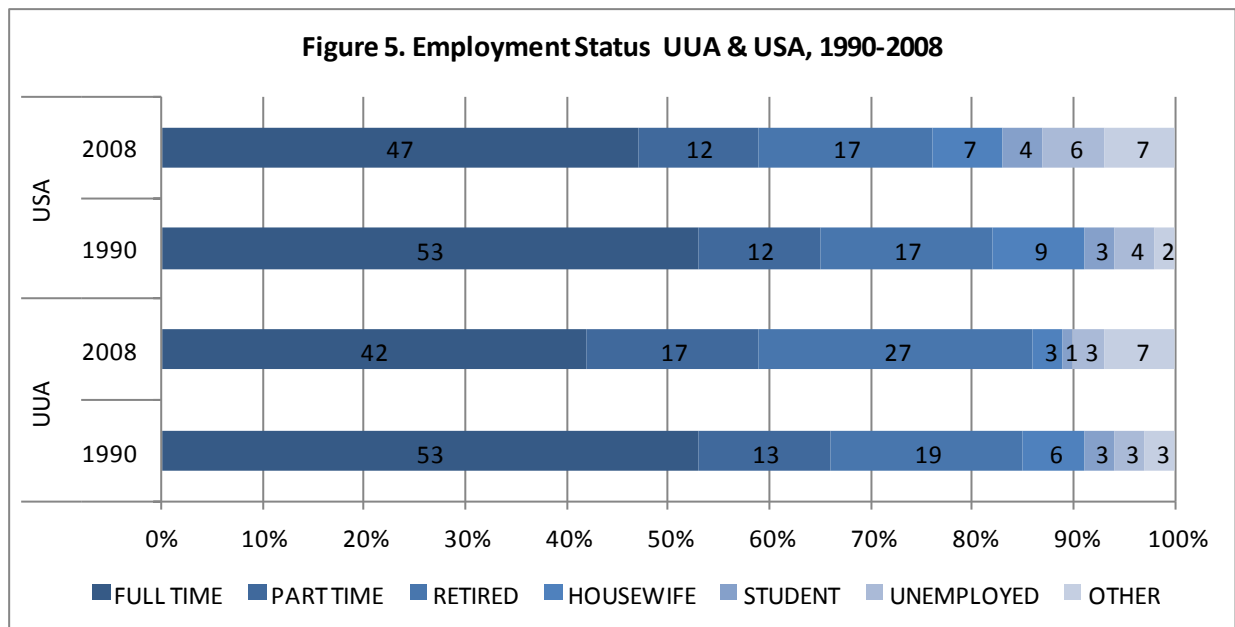
B. ECONOMICS

The household income distribution of the UUA population shown in Table 3 reflects their high level of educational attainment. In 1990 65% of UUA households earned over \$25,000 compared to 50% of U.S. households. In 2008 54% of UUA households and 42% of U.S. households earned over \$50,000. The general affluence of the UUA population is also evident in a high level of home ownership: 78% in 1990 and 81% in 2008.

Table 3. UUA & USA Household Income & Homeownership Patterns 1990 & 2008

| | 1990 | | 2008 | |
|---------------------------|------|-----|------|-----|
| | UUA | USA | UUA | USA |
| INCOME | | | | |
| % Under \$25,000/\$50,000 | 27 | 41 | 39 | 47 |
| % Over \$25,000/\$50,000 | 65 | 50 | 54 | 42 |
| Refused | 8 | 9 | 7 | 11 |
| HOMEOWNERSHIP | | | | |
| % Owns home | 78 | 73 | 81 | 71 |
| % Rents | 22 | 27 | 18 | 27 |

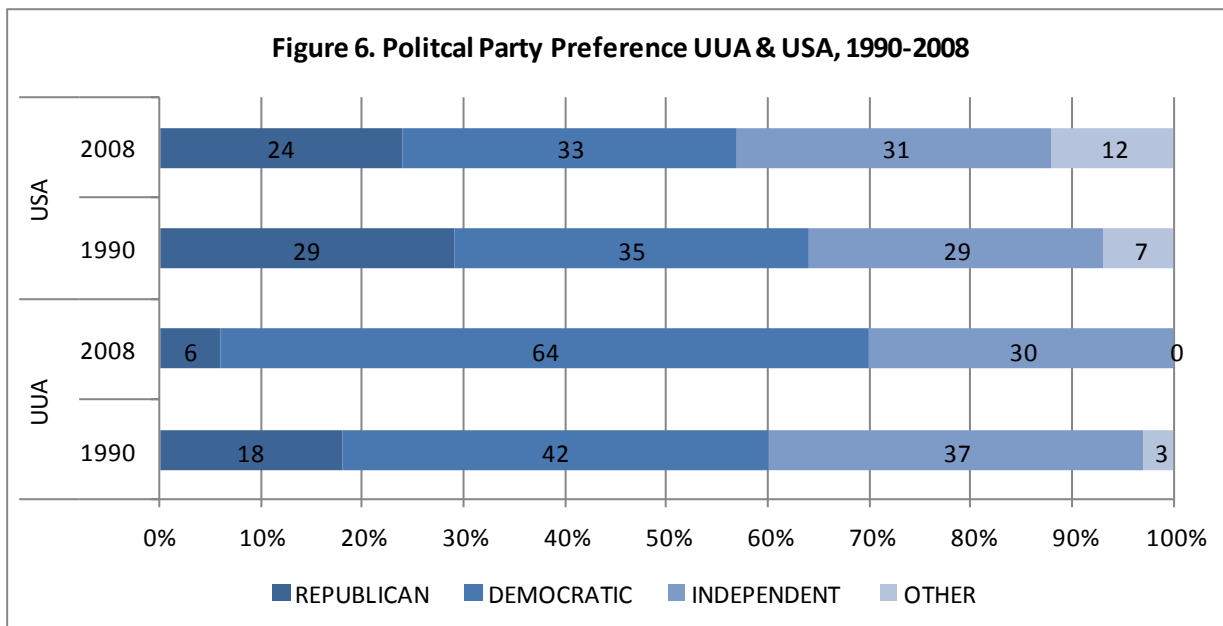
The pattern of employment of UUA adherents was very similar to the national pattern in 1990 but as Figure 5 shows it had more retirees and part-time workers by 2008. It also diverged from the national pattern by having fewer students and unemployed persons in 2008. This employment pattern reflects the overall age and class profile the population.



C. POLITICS

As might be expected given their educational and economic profile, UUA adherents are more likely to register to vote than other Americans. 90% reported being registered compared to the national average of 76% in 2008, this question was not asked in 1990.

UUA adherents also differ from the general U.S. population in political party preference. As Figure 5 shows UUA adherents are much more likely to identify as Democrats than the general U.S. population. In 1990, 42% of UUA adherents and 35% of Americans identified with the Democratic Party. In 2008 UUA adherents were almost twice as likely as the U.S. population to prefer the Democratic Party (64% to 33%, respectively). Moreover, whereas in 1990 the ratio of Democrats-to-Republicans among UUA adherents was 2:1, by 2008 this ratio increased to 11:1. Though the UUA’s partisan split is more skewed than among the U.S. population, they have similar proportions of self-proclaimed independents.



Part IV

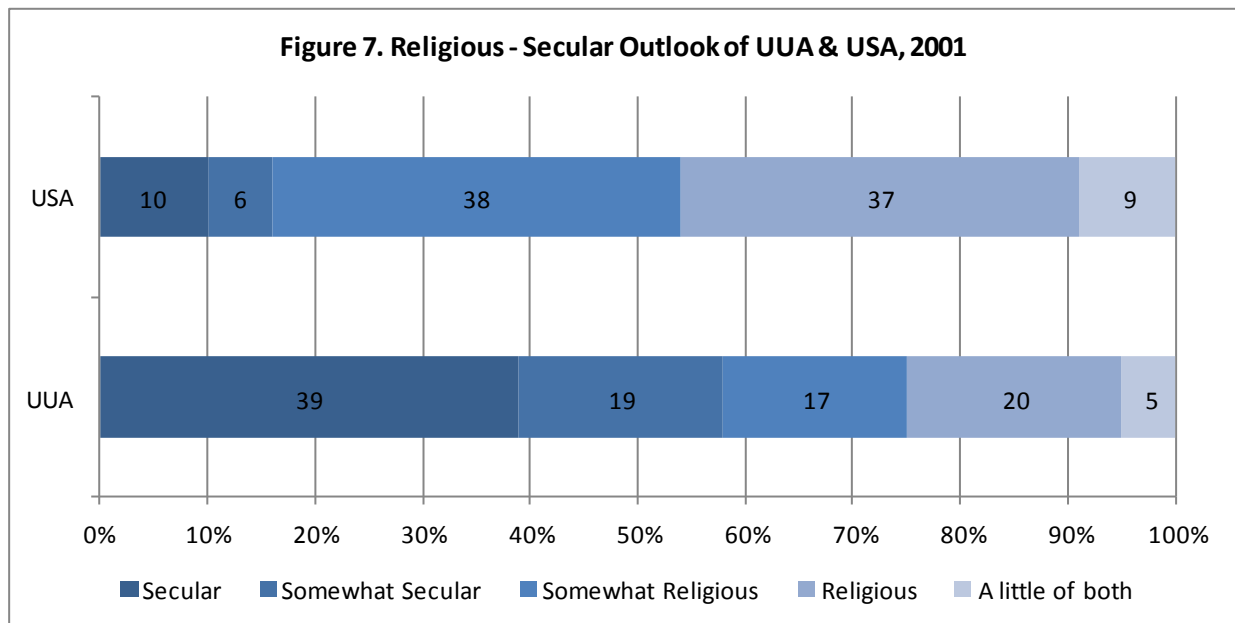
RELIGIOUS BELIEF & BEHAVIOR

ARIS 2001 included a module of detailed religious questions directed towards a sub-sample of 17,000 respondents, including 77 households that reported having at least one Unitarian-Universalist adult.

This is a small sample subject to a large sampling error. Nevertheless given the random nature of the respondents' selection it could be viewed as a national pilot of Unitarians providing insights into their religious beliefs and behaviors compared to the overall American population. These preliminary findings bring to mind further research questions for a follow up study based on a larger sample, which will shed light on the unique patterns of the Unitarian-Universalist community.

A. RELIGIOUS-SECULAR OUTLOOK

When it comes to your outlook, do you regard yourself as ...



Beyond the question of adherence (“*What is your religion, if any?*”), the first question bearing on religious orientation asked respondents to place themselves along a continuum of positions in response to the following: “*When it comes to your outlook, do you regard yourself as: (a) religious, (b) somewhat religious, (c) somewhat secular, or (d) secular?*”

The term outlook was not defined but subsequent analysis shows this item is good at identifying pockets of intensity of piety and religiosity.

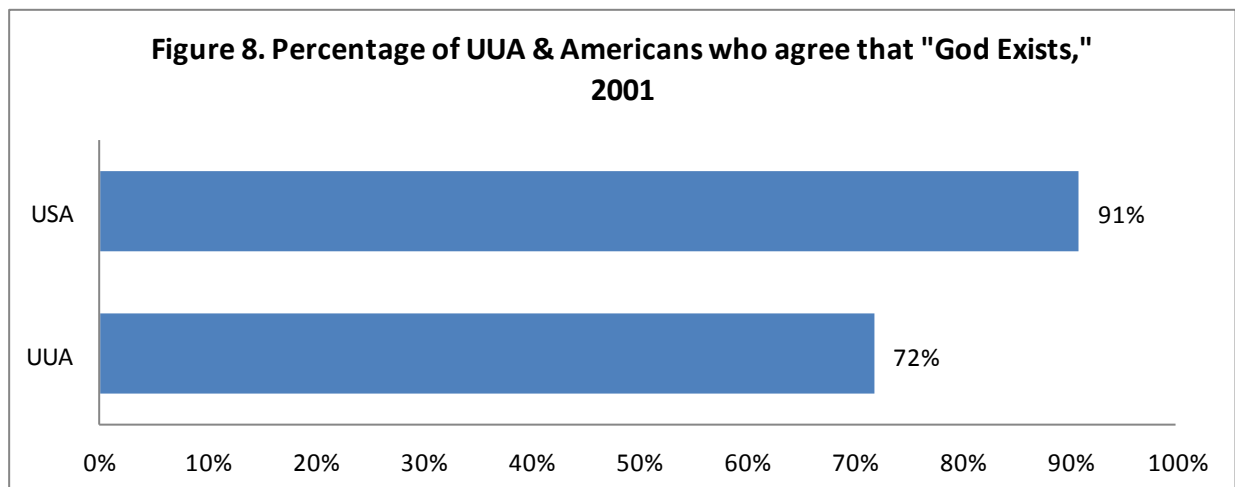
As Figure 7 shows Unitarians are less religious and by far more secular in their outlook compared with the general American population. Nationally, 37% of American adults regard themselves as “religious” and 38% as “somewhat religious,” namely 75% of the adult population. This is in contrast with only 37% of religious outlook Unitarians. Furthermore, the ARIS sub-sample indicates that 39% of Unitarian regard themselves as “secular” and 19% as “somewhat secular” in outlook whereas only 10% of adult Americans describe their outlook as “secular” and 6% as “somewhat secular.”

Interestingly, the Unitarian pattern tends to closely resemble that of American Nones, those who profess no religion among whom 40% regarded themselves “secular” and 13% as “somewhat secular” in 2001. However, the Nones perhaps not unexpectedly have a smaller proportion with a “religious” outlook (only 8%). Even more interesting is the finding that the UUA pattern (58% secular) also somewhat resembles that of America’s Jews (i.e. persons who identify as Jewish-by-religion). Among these “religious” Jews, 44% describe their outlook as “secular” or “somewhat secular.”

B. BELIEF ABOUT GOD

In addition to the question of outlook, survey respondents were asked about their belief in God, belief in miracles, prayer, and the general benefit of a belief in God. When faced by the question: *Do you agree or disagree that God exists?*

Almost one-fifth of Unitarians did not answer which may suggest some doubt. Among those UUA identifiers who did respond 72% of answered positively compared with 91% of Americans in general.



Since the question about “*God performs miracles*” was asked only of those who agreed (either strongly or somewhat) that “*God exists*,” the pattern of answers is especially instructive. Many Unitarians who are believers are doubtful about God’s power to perform miracles – almost 40% of the sample disagree (strongly or somewhat) that “*God performs miracles*” compared with only 11% of theistic

American adults in general who disagree with this statement. Unitarians who believe in God are also by far less likely (60%) than Americans in general (86%) to agree that *God helps me*.

It underscores, yet again, that UUA self-identifiers are quite different in their religious worldview from other believers particularly the Christian majority and that they tend to be more skeptical. However, these findings also suggest that they are a heterogeneous group and tend to differ quite a bit among themselves on the fundamentals of religious faith.

C. MEMBERSHIP IN A CONGREGATION

Less than half (47%) of the sampled Unitarian households reported they were members of a congregation in 2001. This was similar to the national pattern of 54% congregational membership and to that of most other liberal religious groups.

D. RELIGIOUS SWITCHING

ARIS 2001 had a unique question about lifetime religious switching. Respondents were asked if they had ever changed their religious preference. About *half* of current sampled adult Unitarians switched a religion over their life span. In other words, they were either born or raised with another religion before choosing Unitarian as their religious identification.

What was their religious preference before they identified with the UUA?

Around one-fourth had originally been Mainline Christians (such as Methodist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, UCC); about one-in-five were ex-Catholics; about one-in-five had been Baptist; and about one-in-ten were formerly 'atheist' or 'None' or another religious groups. These findings are only suggestive and based on a very small number of respondents so they would benefit from verification in a follow up with a larger sample of switchers.

The UUA community is not only gaining new adherents. There are Unitarians who opt out and switch to another religious group. Based on this sample of over 17,000 adult Americans in 2001, it appears that about 0.3% of switchers used to be Unitarian which gives an extrapolated estimated of about 100,000 adults.

What is the current religious identification of former UUA adherents?

Most former Unitarians preferred to profess no religion, opting for 'none' as their current identification (over 40% of the sample). The other large groups were Catholic and Mainline Christian (Episcopalian and Methodist). These patterns are not based on a robust number of former Unitarian-Universalists and ought to be verified with a larger sample.

E. RELIGIOUS MIXING

ARIS 2001 was also unique in asking respondents about the religious identification of their partners. Here the data is based on the full sample of over 50,000 households. Over *half* of Unitarians in the national sample were in mixed-religion relationships, namely married or cohabitate with somebody with another religious identification, or of no religion.

With whom do UUA adherents form romantic relationships?

Since half of UUA households were homogeneous this suggests that two-thirds of UUA adherents are endogamous. Among the one-in-three in a mixed marriage there was clear selectivity. Over half of these mixed unions are with somebody who is Jewish or somebody who professes no religion.

How do Unitarians in mixed-religion families tend to raise their children?

Mixed couples with children were asked in which religious tradition they raised their children. About one-third of the religiously mixed families raise their children as Unitarian-Universalists; about one-third raises the children with no religion; and the remaining third raise them as Christians (Protestant, Catholic or Baptist).

The Authors

Dr. Barry A. Kosmin is Research Professor in the Public Policy & Law Program at Trinity College and Founding Director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture. A sociologist, Dr. Kosmin has been a principal investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey series since its inception in 1990 as well as national social surveys in Europe, Africa and Asia. His publications on the ARIS include the books *One Nation under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society*, 1993 and *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans*, 2006.

Dr. Ariela Keysar, a demographer, is Associate Professor, Public Policy & Law Program at Trinity College and the Associate Director of the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture. She is a principal investigator of the American Religious Identification Survey 2008 and the Worldviews and Opinions of Scientists-India 2007-08. Dr. Keysar was the Study Director of the American Religious Identification Survey 2001. She is the co-author, *Religion in a Free Market: Religious and Non-Religious Americans*, Paramount Market Publications, Ithaca, N.Y., 2006.

Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society & Culture
Trinity College
300 Summit Street
Hartford, Connecticut 06106
USA
Phone: (860) 297-2381
E-mail: issc@trincoll.edu
www.americanreligionsurvey-aris.org

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