

## THE STORY OF JOHN MURRAY

By David Herndon

Time for All Ages

10 February 2008  
First Unitarian Church  
Pittsburgh, PA

Once upon a time, a man by the name of John Murray sailed across the Atlantic Ocean from England to America. He was twenty-nine years old. John Murray wanted to start a new life in America, for in England, his wife and his son had died, he had spent some time in debtor's prison, and he had been ordered to leave the Methodist Church because he had preached sermons which expressed his belief in universal salvation. John Murray was not quite sure what he would do in America, but he was quite sure that he wanted nothing to do with organized religion and he never wanted to preach another sermon.

The ship which had sailed across the ocean accidentally got stuck in the sand off the coast of New Jersey. John Murray and some of the other passengers got off the boat to look for food and supplies. John Murray met a farmer by the name of Thomas Potter. Thomas Potter had built a small chapel on his land, and he invited traveling preachers to deliver sermons there. He was waiting for one of these traveling preachers to deliver a sermon he could wholeheartedly agree with. When he learned that John Murray was a preacher, he tried to persuade John Murray to preach at his chapel the next Sunday. John Murray did not want to preach sermons any more, but finally he agreed, so long as the wind did not shift and blow the ship out of the sand so that it could sail on to New York. But the wind was steady, and on September 30, 1770, John Murray preached a sermon about universal salvation in Thomas Potter's chapel for all the local people.

After John Murray had finished his sermon, Thomas Potter told him that the message of universal salvation was the message he had been waiting to hear for many years. Just then, a sailor from the ship came to Thomas Potter's chapel and said that the wind had shifted, blowing the ship out of the sand and back into the water, and that the ship was ready to sail once again. Both Thomas Potter and John Murray believed that their meeting was an extraordinary event, perhaps even a miracle, and John Murray decided that he would begin to preach sermons once again. When he finally arrived at New York, he delivered a sermon about universal salvation to a large and enthusiastic audience. Later, John Murray delivered sermons with the message of universal salvation in many towns and cities up and down the Atlantic coast of America, his new home.

In 1774, John Murray decided to settle down in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where he found a group of people eager to hear the message of universal salvation. John

Murray spent most of a year serving the Continental Army as a chaplain, and he became acquainted with George Washington. On January 1, 1779, John Murray's friends in Gloucester organized the Independent Church of Christ. This was the first Universalist church in the United States. The congregation built a church and they dedicated their new church on Christmas Day, 1780.

Not everybody agreed with John Murray's message of universal salvation. On one occasion, when John Murray was delivering a sermon in Boston, somebody threw a rock at John Murray. It came through an open window and almost hit John Murray. But he simply picked up the rock and said: "This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational nor convincing." Then he said: "Not all the stones in Boston, except they stop my breath, shall shut my mouth."<sup>1</sup>

John Murray's Universalist church in Gloucester protested that they had to pay taxes to support the main or established church of the town. Eventually, in 1786, a judge decided that the Universalists could use their tax money to support their own church. In this way, John Murray's Universalist church in Gloucester helped to promote religious freedom and the separation of church and state.

In 1788, John Murray married Judith Sargent Stevens, who spoke out in favor of equal rights for women. She was the most famous feminist in the United States.

In 1790, John Murray traveled to Philadelphia to meet with people from many other Universalist churches. On his way back to Gloucester, he stopped in New York to visit George Washington, who was now President of the United States, as well as Vice-President John Adams and his wife Abigail Adams.

In 1793, John Murray moved from his Universalist church in Gloucester, Massachusetts, to a Universalist church in Boston, Massachusetts. Here he remained until the end of his days, in 1815.

John Murray became known as "the father of Universalism." Here are some words that he spoke: "Go out into the highways and byways of America, your new country. Give the people, blanketed with a decaying and crumbling Calvinism, something of your new vision. You may possess only a small light but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men [and women]. Give them, not hell, but hope and courage. Do not push them deeper into their theological despair, but preach the kindness and everlasting love of God."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles A. Howe, The Larger Faith: A Short History of Universalism (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

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When John Murray traveled to Philadelphia in 1790, approximately seventeen Universalist ministers were serving approximately two dozen Universalist congregations scattered throughout New England and the Middle Atlantic States. Seventeen delegates representing eight Universalist congregations gathered on May 25, 1790, at the Society of Universal Baptists in Philadelphia. The delegates met for two weeks and put together five Articles of Faith, a Plan of Church Government, a series of resolutions on such subjects as war and slavery. The resolution on slavery said, in part: “We believe it to be inconsistent with the union of the human race . . . to hold any part of our fellow-creatures in bondage. We therefore recommend a total refraining from the African trade, and the adoption of prudent measures for the gradual abolition of slavery of the negroes in our country, and for the instruction and education of their children . . .”<sup>3</sup>

Three years later, on September 4, 1793, a group of perhaps as many as several dozen church members and ministers met in Oxford, Massachusetts. These people gathered as representatives of Universalist congregations throughout New England and New York. This so-called General Convention eventually became the Universalist Church of America, providing leadership for the denomination as a whole. Thus, historians of Universalism generally say that 1793 was the year of the founding of organized Universalism in the United States.

The universal salvation preached by John Murray was a welcome message for individuals under the influence of Calvinism who were sincerely troubled about their own fate and the fate of their loved ones. Calvinism stated that God was very, very disappointed and very, very angry with humankind, so disappointed and so angry and so destructively wrathful that God had decided that all people deserved nothing better than eternal punishment in hell. That is, all human beings deserved this fate except for a small number of individuals, the so-called “elect,” who had been marked out for salvation, not as a result of their own good works, but purely as a result of God’s unmerited grace. This was the prevailing doctrine throughout the Christian churches in the United States. John Murray and the other early Universalists preached instead that all people were destined for happiness and holiness and union with their Creator. This message was like warm

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<sup>3</sup> Charles A. Howe, The Larger Faith: A Short History of Universalism (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993), p. 12.

sunshine breaking through the gloomy and grim storm-clouds of the Calvinist doctrine, and it was greeted with eagerness and relief among many people.

The first generation of Universalist leaders included John Murray as well as George de Benneville, Caleb Rich, Elhanan Winchester, and Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. But a doctrinal shift came about with the new leadership of Hosea Ballou, who lived from 1772 to 1852. Spontaneously ordained by Elhanan Winchester at the annual meeting of the General Conference in Oxford, Massachusetts, in 1794, Hosea Ballou became the primary leader of the Universalist movement in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1805, Hosea Ballou published his great work A Treatise of Atonement. The Universalism of John Murray was essentially a form of Calvinism in which the “elect” has been expanded to include all people. For John Murray, God is still very, very disappointed and very, very angry with humankind, but salvation has been provided for all people, not just for some. But Hosea Ballou turned this doctrine on its head. For Ballou, it is not the case that God needs to be reconciled to humankind; rather, humankind needs to be reconciled to God. Ballou’s message was that the central task of salvation is not to satisfy God’s infinite wrath through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus, an infinite being. Rather, the central task of salvation is to bring about a change in human hearts. Historian Charles Howe summarizes Ballou’s theology in this way: “Rather than coming to appease God’s anger, Christ came to the world to demonstrate the power of the law of love through which men and women can turn away from sin and be reconciled to God.”<sup>4</sup> One early Universalist preacher stated this same principle rather more vividly when he said that God will not rest until “the last sinner will be dragged kicking and cursing into heaven.”<sup>5</sup> In this statement, God has not rejected humankind out of disappointment or anger, and therefore does not need to be reconciled to humankind. Rather, human beings, whose understanding of the moral law is incomplete, need to experience a change of heart and thereby be reconciled to God. The Quaker William Penn also provided a vivid summary of this understanding of universal salvation when he stated that “No sinner can ever fall lower than the arms of God can reach.”

In 1816, a year after the death of John Murray, Hosea Ballou was called to the Second Society of Universalists in the Town of Boston, where he served as minister for twenty-eight years.

Between 1820 and 1840, the Universalist denomination experienced vigorous growth and expansion, becoming at one time the fifth or sixth largest denomination in the United States, with 853 churches, 512 ministers, and 600,000 adherents. Although Universalism proclaimed the distinctively progressive doctrine of universal salvation, it remained thoroughly biblical and Christian. During these years, the Universalist denomination struggled with the question of whether there might be a limited period of punishment after death for some individuals. The so-called Restorationists claimed that limited punishment would precede salvation in some cases, while the so-called Ultra-Universalists, also known as the Death-and-Glory Universalists, claimed that after death,

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Scott Alexander, “Answering the Religious Right with the Big Heart of Universalism,” in Salted with Fire: Unitarian Universalist Strategies for Sharing Faith and Growing Congregations (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1994) p. 33.

all people would immediately be restored to holiness and happiness with God. Another fascinating chapter of Universalist history from this period was the creation of Hopedale, the Universalist utopian community which flourished from 1842 through the 1850s under the leadership of Adin Ballou, a distant cousin of Hosea Ballou. Throughout these colorful years, Hosea Ballou was widely acknowledged as the principal leader of Universalism. Upon his death in 1852, the Unitarian minister Theodore Parker offered this tribute: “He went through the land proclaiming this great truth, and he has wrought a revolution in the thoughts and minds of men [and women] more mighty than any which has been accomplished during the same time by all the politicians of the nation.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1847, Hosea Ballou II, grandnephew of the elder Hosea Ballou, challenged the denomination to expand its focus to include social reform and the creation of strong denominational institutions. Accordingly, Tufts College in Medford, Massachusetts, was established in 1852 to provide for the education of Universalist ministers. St. Lawrence University in Canton, New York, was similarly established in 1856 to provide for the education of Universalist ministers. The Universalists also established several other institutions of higher learning during the latter half of the nineteenth century, including Throop Polytechnic Institute, which later became the California Institute of Technology.

Another response to the message of Hosea Ballou II was the growth of the Universalist General Reform Association, which focused denominational attention on such issues as slavery and women’s rights.

Another significant development during this period was the adoption in 1848 of a more theologically conservative Statement of Faith. All candidates for the Universalist ministry were required to subscribe to this Statement of Faith, and some have speculated that it was drafted in part in response to the writing of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker, who were at that time challenging the Unitarian movement to move beyond the generally accepted boundaries of Christianity. As early as the late 1860s, however, tentative conversations about a merger of the Unitarians and the Universalists had begun.

In 1863, Olympia Brown was ordained to the Universalist ministry, becoming the first female minister in the United States to be ordained with full denominational authority. She devoted much of her time and energy toward securing voting rights for women, and she lived long enough to see this take place in 1920.

Twelve thousand people gathered in Gloucester, Massachusetts, in 1870 to celebrate the centennial of the arrival of John Murray in America. In the years following, the denomination took steps to clarify its identity as distinctively but decidedly Christian, and one minister, Herman Bisbee, was asked to leave the denomination because his theological views had become too distant from the Christian theological center of Universalism. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, many other denominations had adopted the message of universal salvation, and the Universalists began to wonder what their distinctive mission might be. The World Parliament of Religions, which took place in 1893 in Chicago, exposed the Universalists to a wider acquaintance with contemporary currents in religious thought and action. Some Universalist leaders became involved with an effort to unite various religious groups into the American Congress of Liberal Religious Societies. In Chicago, the list of affiliated congregations in 1895

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<sup>6</sup> Howe, p. 46.

included “six Universalist and three Unitarian churches, as well as three Jewish congregations, the Ethical Culture Society, a Quaker meeting, the Independent Liberal Church, the People’s Church, and Jenkin Lloyd Jones’ All Souls Church. In parallel to the development of the more liberal Western Conference within Unitarianism, the so-called “New Universalism” sought connections between the Universalist denomination and more theologically liberal groups. Reflecting the spirit of uncertainty with regard to identity and mission, J. M. Pullman of railroad fame addressed these words to the Universalist leadership: “You Universalists have squatted on the biggest word in the English language. Now the world is beginning to want that big word, and you Universalists must either improve the property or move off the premises!”<sup>7</sup> The General Conference, meeting in 1899, restored the Liberty Clause to the by-laws of the denomination. Originally part of the earliest statement of Universalist theological identity, the Liberty Clause provided room for theological difference, but had been removed earlier in the nineteenth century as the denomination sought to reaffirm its Christian identity. Thus, the World Parliament of Religions, the American Congress of Liberal Religious Societies (which dissolved after 1900), and the restoration of the Liberty Clause opened the door for a newer and broader sense of identity and mission for the Universalist Church.

Clarence Russell Skinner, who lived from 1881 to 1949, served on the faculty of Crane Theological School at Tufts University for thirty-one years, from 1914 to 1945, provided much of the social vision and theological innovation that became widespread within Universalism. Skinner helped introduce the Social Gospel movement to Universalism; but he also provided a theological basis for social justice work that pushed the denomination to become more theologically liberal. Charles Howe writes: “Although his theology went far beyond the limits of traditional Protestant Christianity, it did incorporate the main elements of the Protestant Social Gospel: the immanence of God, an organic (or unified) view of the social order, the ethical teachings of Jesus, and the progressive establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1925, both the Unitarians and the Congregationalists sent inquiries to the Universalists about the possibility of stronger connections or possibly even merger. Neither group knew that the other had sent an inquiry. The Universalists entered into conversations with both the Unitarian and the Congregationalists; the conversation with the Unitarians seemed to go better. In 1942, the Universalist Church of America sought membership with the National Council of Churches, but the application was not accepted. A new application was submitted in 1944; this was also turned down because the Universalists were insufficiently Christ-centered, although the Universalist Church included a theological spectrum which included many who were thoroughly Christian in their expression of Universalism as well as many others who had moved away from this position.

Merger talks with the Unitarians proceeded slowly throughout the 1940s and 1950s. There was reluctance and suspicion on both sides, particularly on the Universalist side. One Universalist said that “the Unitarians seemed more interested ‘in analyzing the nature of infinity than in the spirit of love. I feel that I ought to put on my company

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 97-98.

manners when I go into a Unitarian church.”<sup>9</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century, Thomas Starr King, who was well-acquainted with both the Unitarians and the Universalists, famously distinguished the two denominations by saying that the Universalists believed that God was too good to damn them, while the Unitarians believed that they were too good to be damned. But Paul Carnes, who later became President of the Unitarian Universalist Association, said that once the two sides started working together, “something happened to the Universalists. They met the Unitarians and found that the Unitarians are, more or less, just like Universalists except that there are more of them and they make more noise.”<sup>10</sup>

In May 1960, the two denominations met together to celebrate their merger. On that occasion, they joined in this pledge: “We, Unitarians and Universalists, children of the Judeo-Christian heritage, inheritors of the wisdom of the universal prophets, eager to experience the insights of the great faiths of the world, open to all sources of inspiration, ancient and modern, determined to explore the boundless ocean of truth which lies about on every hand, and welcoming into fellowship all men [and women] of whatever background of faith, here together on this night of Consolidation, conscious of the presence of the past, and of our urgent tasks, dedication ourselves anew to the free and universal fellowship of all [humankind] that is the church to be. We declare our allegiance to the new Unitarian Universalist Association, and pledge our lives, our fortunes, and our faith to its high purpose and sure upbuilding.”<sup>11</sup> The Unitarian Universalist Association formally and legally came into being the following year, in May of 1961.

Historian Charles Howe has identified “seven values that Universalists brought with them to the merger: a theology founded on the affirmation of love; a thoroughly democratic church government; a social conscience motivated by their belief in the supreme worth of every human person; a conviction that liberal religion can and should speak to all sorts and conditions of people; an insistence on the equality of women and men in both church and society; a recognition that liberal religion requires emotional warmth as well as intellectual rigor; and, finally, the great vision of inclusiveness implied by the Universalist name.”<sup>12</sup> At the time of merger, or consolidation, many Universalists feared that their identity and message would be swallowed up by the more numerous Unitarians. But with the mention of these seven values, we must surely acknowledge that the Universalist influence on Unitarian Universalism has been of tremendous benefit for all of us in this denomination, and the continuing challenge is to what extent all of us in this denomination can practice the truly amazing aspirations contained in these values.

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.