

[Rise and Development of the Congregational Polity and Spirit]

[VIII.] John Murray and the Beginning of the
Universalist Movement

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We have already seen how Calvinism was losing its hold on the popular mind, and was rapidly coming to its end under the disintegrating influences of the changing New England life. The rise of the liberal party within the church, who held to un-Calvinistic views, was brought to public attention by the controversies of which Charles Chauncey was the champion of the liberal side, and Johnathan Edwards the champion of the reactionists. Edwards' cause was taken up by Hopkins and Emmons,² and carried to its logical conclusions. All this brings us up to about the year 1800 or just at the dawn of the Unitarian controversy, which a few years later divided the New England Congregational body into two factions known by the names Unitarian and Trinitarian Congregationalists.

At this time the religious world of New England was well split up into factions. Besides the liberal branch of the Congregational churches, and the two clearly defined factions among the conservatives, there was the Methodist movement, the Deistic movement, the best known exponent of which was Thomas Paine, whose essential views represented the religious movement outside the church. In addition to this array for forces, there was the Universalist body, the

¹ Earl C. Davis wrote a good number of manuscripts concerning the history of the church. All are hand-written dating them before 1907—so Pittsfield or Harvard. Some, including this one, are pretty clearly part of a series provided to a congregation—so probably Pittsfield.

² Charles Chauncy (1705-1787), Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), Samuel Hopkins (1721-1803), Nathanael Emmons (1745-1840) were all New England preachers. Earl Davis has written short individual pieces about each of these men, which can be found in his historical writings.

nature of whose ideas, and the beginning of whose history we are interested in today under the name of John Murray.

The nature and general character of Murray appear in a few extracts from his autobiography, which I will quote for the main outlines of his life. He says, "I think, if I mistake not, I was ushered into this state of being on the 10th day of December, 1741, ... I drew my first breath in the island of Great Britain, in the town of Alton, in Hampshire."³

His school days and early life were not unusual, but a bit of insight comes into the conditions of the times in the following,

The doctrines taught by that gloomy Reformer (Calvin), they (parents) undeviatingly taught to their family: and hence my soul frequently experienced the extreme of agony. Naturally vivacious, to implant religion among my juvenile pleasures required the most vigorous and uniform effort. Religion was not a native of the soil, it was an exotic, which when planted, could only be kept alive by the most persevering attention. Hence Religion became a subject of terror. I was not ten years old when I began to suffer; the discovery of my sufferings gave my fond father much pleasure; he cherished hope of me when he found me suffering from my fears, and much indeed was I tortured by the severe unbending discipline of my father, and the terrifying apprehensions of what I had to expect from the God who created me. The second son of my parents was naturally of a pensive, gloomy disposition. He was more piously disposed, and less fond of amusement than myself, and hearing much of Cain as the eldest son of Adam, of Esau as the eldest son of Isaac, and of Able and Jacob as the younger sons, my soul was frequently filled with terror, verily believing my brother was the elected, and myself the rejected of God. This appalling consideration, even at this early period, frequently devoted my

³ John Murray, *Records of the Life of the Reverend John Murray*, Boston: Marsh Capen & Lyon, and Waitt & Dow, 1831, p. 10.

days and nights to tears and lamentation. (*Life of Murray*, p. 17).

Shortly after this, when John was about 11 years old, the Murray family moved to Ireland in a town near Cork. Here they came under the influence of the Wesleys and became Methodists, and young Murray at the age of 16 became a very zealous and religious youth. The death of his father while he was still young, and the general influence of his somewhat adventurous nature, he left Ireland for England.

Marriage, the death of his wife, and the fact that his creditors forced him to prison for his debts, the bereaved and discouraged man leaves England for America, where he was to become a promulgator of the Gospel in America. This was about 1770. He had become connected to the tenets of Universalism through the influence of one James Relly.

Against his own will he became a preacher of the Universalist ideas in America, and soon aroused considerable opposition among the Calvinistic clergy of Philadelphia, and gained something of a following.

Earnest solicitations led him to go to New England. He visited and preached at Newport, where he came in contact with Samuel Hopkins, and had some bitter words with him.

By October 30, 1773, Murray had reached Boston and preached his first sermon in Boston on that date.

This journey to New England led to his receiving a call to become Pastor of a Church in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He declined. On the Christmas day of 1780, Mr. Murray first preached in a small neat building erected for his use by the people of Gloucester, which had organized as an independent Church of Christ." Here he labored until 1793 when he was installed in the Universalist Meeting House in Boston. He died in Boston in 1815.

John Murray was the first great apostle of Universalism in America. The Universalist body differed from the Calvinists in this one essential idea. Where the Calvinists believed in the salvation of the elect, the Universalists believed in the salvation of every man through the

atonement of Christ. But under the influence of Hosea Ballou, whose famous sermon of 1805 was the immediate cause, practically the entire Universalist group became Unitarian. The two bodies were kept apart by virtue of the fact that there was present among the Universalists a certain kind of mystical or possibly superstitious embellishment as illustrated in the life of Murray (Landlords giving him money etc.) which was very obnoxious to the Unitarians of that time.