

# How Hell Died in America

(On John Murray, Founder of American Universalism)

By

**Robert P. Tucker, Ph.D.**

[Minister Emeritus of the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Lakeland, Florida]

The UU Congregation of Lake County, Eustis, Florida – September 30, 2018 - Copyright © 2018 Robert P. Tucker

“This, that you have heard is the case with every one of you...that world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful Pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is Hell’s wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor anything to take hold of; there is nothing between you and Hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up!” So said the Rev. **Jonathan Edwards** in his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Since tomorrow marks the 272<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of that speech, I thought today would be an excellent time to celebrate it by offering some historical rebuttal! [Seldes; “Sinners...”; delivered 7/8/1741.]

From colonial times down to the present, most Americans have experienced religion in similarly dreadful frames of mind. **Dissenting voices** have arisen, but usually in other countries.

In France, **Victor Hugo** (d. 1885) expressed this opinion: “Hell is an outrage on humanity. When you tell me that your deity made you in his own image, I reply that he must have been very ugly.” [Seldes, 467]

In Britain, **Bertrand Russell** (d. 1970) declared: “The infliction of cruelty with a good conscience is a delight to moralists. That is why they invented Hell.” [Seldes, 467]

As **Unitarian Universalists**, we are more at home with Hugo and Russell than we are with Edwards.

How, then, did “Hell” die for us in America?

In part, the answer rests with a wonderful man named **John Murray and with the only “miracle” Universalism ever thought about claiming**. Since today marks the 248<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the day on which this founder of American Universalism, John Murray, preached his first sermon on our soil, this is a most appropriate day for me to tell you about his amazing life and times.

John Murray was born in England in 1741. His mother was a gentle Presbyterian, but his father was a stern, Calvinistic Anglican. As a child, John was carefully “warned by his father about the anticipated terrors of the damned and the horrors of ‘endless misery’” that Hell would bring. [Miller, I, 3f.] His father required the family to pray frequently, read the Bible, undergo rigorous self-examinations, and attend not one, but two church services on Sundays, beginning at 5:00 a.m.!

When John was ten years old, his family moved to Ireland. His father became a close friend of John Wesley and young Murray became deeply involved in Methodism, though he remained an Anglican.

Now one thing greatly bothered John about the Church of England: it appeared to believe that “glooms and melancholy” were the only “infallible signs” that someone belonged to the “elect” who were “saved.” [Miller, I, 5] Unfortunately for him, he found that his own sadness “was not uniform,” and that his frequent cheerfulness was not respectable! [*Ibid.*]

In his late teens, John Murray began to preach. But, he “cherished liberty to act myself without restraint.” He also became convinced that God had appointed for him “a life of wandering.” [*Ibid.*, 6]

Soon he set off for London. There he heard the great revivalist, George Whitefield, whose interdenominational approach was somewhat less conservative than anything John had experienced. John began visiting other churches. He also fell in love and was married, all in his eighteenth year. [*Ibid.*, 6-8]

About this time, the Methodist church commissioned John and some other members to rescue a young woman whom they felt had strayed from the straight and narrow. She had been listening to the preaching of a fellow named **James Relly** and had come to believe in **universal salvation**. John had heard much about Relly and had already made up his mind. As he later wrote: “Thus I passed on for a number of years, hearing all manner of evil said of Mr. Relly, and believing all I heard, while every day augment[ing] the inveterate hatred,

which I bore the man.” [Cassara, 56] Indeed, Murray wanted to send the law out to stop Relly from sending souls into perdition! [*Ibid.*]

So Murray and the other Methodists called on the young lady. But for this one doctrine, it was admitted that she led an irreproachable life of piety. [*Ibid.*, 56-59 for the following; emphases added.] She received them with kindness. Murray reminded her of “the deplorable condition of those, who live, and die in unbelief,” adding, “He, that believeth not, shall be damned.” As Murray recounted in his later writings, the young lady replied: “And pray, Sir...what is the unbeliever damned for not believing?” Murray answered, for not believing in Jesus Christ as the complete saviour of himself and of others, to which she responded: “Why, Sir, is Jesus Christ the saviour of any unbelievers?” No, madam, of course not, Murray said. “Why, then,” she asked, “should any unbeliever believe, that Jesus Christ is his saviour, if he is not his saviour?” Murray spluttered back that Jesus is not someone’s saviour until that person believes. She said: “Then, if Jesus is not the saviour of the unbeliever until he believes, then the unbeliever is called upon to believe a lie!” She continued by asking: “Do you think Jesus is your saviour, Sir?” After an affirmative reply, she asked: “Were you always a believer, Sir?” Murray had to answer, no, to which she said: “Then you were once an unbeliever... Now, as you say, he never was, nor never will be, the saviour of any unbeliever; as you were once an unbeliever, he never can be your saviour!” “Here I was extremely embarrassed,” Murray later wrote. Drawing out his watch, recollecting some imaginary engagement, he took his leave. “I was extremely mortified,” he wrote. “The young lady observed my confusion.” Worse than that, Murray suspected “that my religious brethren saw she had the advantage of me; and I felt, that her remarks were indeed unanswerable... She ha[d] proved too mighty for me...[and] the result of this visit had depreciated me in the opinion of my companions... From this period, I myself carefully avoided every Universalist, and most cordially did I hate them. My ear was open to the public calumniator, to the secret whisperer, and I yielded credence to every scandalous report, however improbable... I believed it would be difficult to paint Relly, and his connexions, in colours too black.”

Soon after this, a physician asked Murray to critique a manuscript he wanted to publish in opposition to James Relly. Murray was shocked to find no counter-arguments, but only name-calling and abuse in the book. [Miller, I, 8]

Murray then obtained a copy of Relly’s own writings. After careful study, he wondered how it was possible that “discoveries so important should never until now have been made.” He decided the time had come for him to hear Relly preach. Except that Relly’s congregation “did not appear very religious; that is, they were not melancholy,” everything impressed Murray positively. He believed that Relly’s was “the first consistent sermon I have ever heard.” It convinced him to abandon the predestinarian doctrine of divine election of some to Heaven and some to Hell, and to admit that there is good and evil in every person. For some time thereafter, John and his wife attended Relly’s services for one half of each Sunday, and their old Methodist services for the other half. This, John later wrote, let them hear “the truth, without running the risk of losing our reputation.” [*Ibid.*, 8-9]

Nevertheless, someone reported to the Methodists that John was attending Relly’s services, and he was promptly excommunicated! [*Ibid.*, 10]

Sadly, this was just the beginning of a series of tragedies that befell John Murray. His only son died at the age of one. His wife became ill. His old religious friends deserted him. His brothers-in-law quarreled with him. His wife died (1769), and then so did one of his brothers and three of his sisters. His mother and other brother, James, condemned his belief in universal salvation. He barely escaped debtor’s prison, and finally he fell into depression. His steadfast friend in all this was James Relly who encouraged him to go preach. But, as Murray later wrote, at that point he preferred “to pass through life, unheard, unseen, unknown to all, as though I ne’er had been.” [*Ibid.*, 10]

### MURRAY 3

Just when his luck seemed to have run out, Murray “accidentally met a gentleman from America,” whose stories about that distant land fascinated him. On July 21, 1770, Murray set sail for New York. Three days from America, his ship met another bound for England, and received a false report about import regulations which caused his captain to change course for Philadelphia. There the false information was revealed, and the ship headed out for New York, only to run aground off of the New Jersey coast. The ship’s cargo was transferred to a smaller sloop with Murray in charge, But then, the wind stopped blowing! [*Ibid.*, 11]

John Murray went ashore, and began what Universalists have always called, “**The Great Pilgrimage.**” The place he landed was called “Good-luck Point,” and there he met a farmer, named **Thomas Potter**. A deeply religious man, Potter believed in universal salvation. He had even built a chapel on his farm, in the hope that God would send him a preacher to proclaim the good news of salvation for all people. [*Ibid.*, 11-12]

“On learning that Murray had once done some preaching, Potter invited him to deliver a sermon the following Sunday. Murray at first refused but gave in to Potter’s persistent urging and accepted, provided that the wind did not change first and blow the ship off the sandbar. Potter assured him that it would not, and indeed the wind held steady. Murray’s sermon on universal grace, delivered...on **September 30, 1770**, was evidently exactly the one Potter had long been waiting to hear [for he told Murray, “This is the happiest day of my life,” and that he could now die in peace (Cassara, 65)] and its effect on Murray himself was likewise profound—by the time he had finished, his reservations about preaching were gone forever. Soon after the service was over, a sailor came from the ship with the news that the wind had just changed direction, and the ship was off the sandbar and ready to sail. Potter and Murray both regarded their chance meeting and the postponement of the wind’s change as a sign of God’s providence—it was perhaps **the only miracle in Universalist history!**” [Howe, 2]

From then onward, John Murray began to preach up and down the coasts of New England, proclaiming to all who would listen the gospel of universal salvation. As his fame grew, so did opposition to him. [Miller, I, 13f.] On one visit to Philadelphia, for example, he found every pulpit in every church in the city closed to him, and all of the local clergy in unanimous condemnation of his message, with some calling him deluded and insane. [*Ibid.*, 14]

Murray’s preaching differed dramatically from his contemporaries. One particular Baptist minister “became virulent” in his opposition. He told Murray that each week he walked nine miles to preach to his congregation of around 100 members. Murray asked him how many of these members were “saved” members of “the elect.” The reply was, “may be ten.” Murray asked him, “Do you think the non-elect can take any steps to extricate themselves from [such a] tremendous situation?” The reply came without hesitation: “Certainly not; every sermon they hear will sink them deeper, and deeper in damnation.” Murray was astounded to hear this minister confess that he walked nine miles every week in order to sink 90 persons out of 100 deeper and deeper into never-ending misery! [Cassara, 67]

In stark contrast, listen to Murray’s own prescription for preaching given to other Universalist ministers: “Go out into the highways and byways of America... 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 [people’s] hearts and minds... 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. [Howe, 9]

In New York (1772) Murray’s situation was complicated by mistaken identity: there were two preachers named “John Murray,” one a Calvinist, the other a Universalist. Some people distinguished them by calling the one, “Damnation” Murray, and the other, “Salvation” Murray! [Miller, I, 14f.]

Everywhere he went, John Murray faced opposition and name-calling:

In 1773, the Rev. Andrew Crosswell, of the 11th Congregational Society in Boston called Murray “a dangerous man.” [*Ibid.*, 16]

In 1774, the Boston congregation to which Murray was preaching was “drenched with water” by his opponents. [*Ibid.*]

During a different service, Murray and his hearers had to “dodge stones thrown through the windows.” [*Ibid.*, 17] When one rock narrowly missed his head, Murray picked up the rock and said: “This argument is solid and weighty, but it is neither rational nor convincing.” [Howe, 4] He then told his audience, “Not all the stones in Boston, except they stop my breath, shall shut my mouth, or arrest my testimony.” Recalling the deadly history of religious oppression in Europe, he expressed his thankfulness “for the religious liberty” he had found in America. [Miller, I, 17]

Sometimes, Murray was able to deflect his opponents’ venom with nothing more than pointed humor. When, for example, a Rev. John Bacon challenged Murray, and his supporters pelted Murray with eggs, Murray conquered his enemy with wit. When the barrage stopped, Murray said: “These are moving arguments, but I must own at the same time, I have never been so fully treated to Bacon and eggs before in all my life!” [*Ibid.*, 31]

Not all opposition was so easily overcome.

Two attempts were made to have Murray “banished” from the colonies. They failed. [*Ibid.*, 17]

As America moved toward its Revolutionary War, Murray was charged with being a foreign agent working against the revolution and trying to set up an American episcopate for the Church of England! Indeed, in 1777, a local committee of public safety ordered him to depart; but no action was taken. In fact, Murray was a patriotic American whose role as an army chaplain was confirmed by the Revolutionary Army’s Commander-in-Chief, George Washington. Beyond that, Murray became close friends with many prominent and patriotic Americans, including John Hancock (signer of the Declaration of Independence), Benjamin Franklin, and John and Abigail Adams. [*Ibid.*, 17-19, 28, 30]

In 1788, however, Massachusetts seemed ready to arrest Murray when he refused to pay a fine falsely levied on him because of confusion concerning whether or not he had been performing weddings without benefit of governmentally recognized ordination. He temporarily fled to England. There he was welcomed as a conquering hero. Massachusetts eventually recognized the validity of Murray’s ordination, and he returned to America. [*Ibid.*, 27f.]

Although a few others in America had preached universal salvation before he arrived in 1770, it was Murray who did the most to establish Universalist congregations, and eventually a Universalist denomination, so that it is he who came to be acknowledged as the “**Founder of American Universalism.**” [cf. Frontispiece, Miller, i, iii; 34-44]

Only a few days short of his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, John Murray died on September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1815. [*Ibid.*, 33]

More progressive than most, Murray was yet a man of his own times—still a devout, Trinitarian Christian who would have been astonished and perhaps alarmed at the humanistic cynicism we take for granted. Nevertheless, he blazed a trail for us, because he was a man who clearly understood the truth expressed by poet **John Milton** in *Paradise Lost*:

The mind is its own place,  
And in itself  
Can make a heaven of Hell,  
A Hell of heaven. [Seldes, 465]

For most of us, **Hell died in America because of John Murray.** Blessed be his name. Amen!

Sources

Cassara, Ernest. *Universalism in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.

Howe, Charles A. *The Larger Faith: A Short History of American Universalism*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1993.

Miller, Russell E. *The Larger Hope: The First Century of the Universalist Church in America, 1770-1870* (v. 1 of 2). Boston: UUA, 1979.

Seldes, George. *The Great Quotations*. New York: Pocket Books, 1967.

“Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.” Wikipedia. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinners\\_in\\_the\\_Hands\\_of\\_an\\_Angry\\_God](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinners_in_the_Hands_of_an_Angry_God)

You may contact Dr. Tucker at: [drroberttucker@aol.com](mailto:drroberttucker@aol.com)