

**HOSEA BALLOU AND THE  
GOSPEL RENAISSANCE OF  
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

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Hosea Ballou and the Gospel Renaissance of the Nineteenth Century by John Coleman Adams

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*Mosca Ballou*

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BY

REV. JOHN COLEMAN ADAMS, D.D.



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*Delivered before the Universalist General Convention at Buffalo, N.Y.,  
Sunday, October 20, 1901.*

By REV. JOHN COLEMAN ADAMS, D.D.

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"The stone which the builders refused is become the headstone of  
the corner." — Ps. 118 : 22.

WE are met for the first session of this Convention in a new century. It has seemed to me that no theme could better fit the time and occasion than one which should send our minds back over the century just closed, to trace the relations of our Church to the development of religious thought in America during that period.

It is a fact not always noted that geography has an important bearing upon the evolution of religious ideas. The same process of enlightenment and growth may go on simultaneously in various parts of the world. The same problems may be worked out in very different and quite independent ways in different lands. The progress of the Spirit in America during the nineteenth century is a case in point. The liberal movement in Christianity has



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gone on here in ways peculiar to the land and its own religious life. The Broad Churchmen of England and America stand to-day upon practically the same great affirmations. But the process by which we have come into our convictions in America is quite independent of that which has prepared the way for our brethren across seas. We had our own conditions to start with, our own leaders, our own great campaigns. The Universalist Church has had a most important function in the great movement which has gone on over the world, as a revival of the primitive Gospel of Jesus. To appreciate this work calls for a review of our religious progress for a full century.

To go back a hundred years in America's religious life is to sink pretty much all the names which are the great spiritual landmarks for the men and women of to-day. The theologians may fix their eyes on the compass and the stars, but the people pick their path by the waymarks of great lives. And they march and climb to-day with their eyes on the mighty names of the last hundred years. Retracing the years of that century, think what we lose! Brooks and Beecher and Bushnell sink below the horizon; Theodore Parker disappears, and the Wares and William Ellery Channing. Every Unitarian church vanishes, and most of the churches of our own name. We lose the books we have read the most — Bushnell's "Vicarious Sacrifice" and Farrar's "Eternal Hope" and Fiske's "Destiny of Man," with such epoch-making poems as "The Eternal Goodness" and "In Memoriam," and such yeasty writings as Emerson's "Essays" and Parker's "Discourses on Religion." We find ourselves in

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a time of theological gloom and religious pessimism, untempered by the liberal faith and good cheer. Methodism offered the only assuagement of Calvinism which the people could accept, and all the mitigation it could present was to affirm that if the human race was totally wrecked, the fault was not God's, but man's. Small consolation that, to those adrift and sinking with the hulk! The thought of God brought up the idea of a stern and vengeful being. Jesus was the peacemaker, pleading with an angered monarch. Human nature was the synonym for all depravities. Life meant a probation, with the chances all against the soul. Salvation was an insurance arrangement which guaranteed a future heaven. Parents mourned for little babes in hell. Men dared not mourn at all for their other unregenerate dead. John Murray, indeed, was abroad in the land. But few men dared give audience to the strange faith he proclaimed. And even he himself did not comprehend the mighty work which was to be done, nor was he equal to the mighty thoughts which were to bring in the new era. His theology was hardly more than a sterilized Calvinism—an attempt to purge the popular teaching of the germs of infidelity and despair. It was a prophecy of the great religious break-up, as the bluebird is the prophet of the spring. The last third of the eighteenth century in America was a very winter of religious thought. The streams of a true spiritual apprehension were frozen. The world lay cold and hard under the icy breath of Calvinism. The seeds of generous sentiment were locked in the soil. But the beginning of the nineteenth century was a theological month of March.

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The air began to change, a milder spirit breathed over men's thoughts. A new element was warring with the frigid dogmas of the stern old creed. And like all the new elements in man's moral life, this was incarnated in a human soul. It was the out-put of a human life. That life was lived by Hosea Ballou.

In 1771, ten years before Channing's birth, thirteen years after Edwards had died, there was born in a little hamlet of New Hampshire a man who was to be the equal, in his thought and his work, of both Channing and Edwards. When the Calvinism of which Edwards was the type and the exponent was almost absolute in America, this man thought out the system which was to displace Calvinism as the religion of the masses. It was he and not John Murray who gave to Universalism the solid basis which saved it from the destruction which awaited the premises on which Murray and Rely had rested it. It was he, and not Channing, who first gave form and force to the truths about the Unity and the Fatherhood of God, which have steadily crowded all less worthy doctrines out of men's minds. He preached the central truth which inspired the Unitarian schism, eight years before Channing's settlement in Boston, and twenty years before the outbreak of the great controversy in the Congregational churches. In 1805 he gave to the world the "Treatise on Atonement," the first American book to outline and to urge the Broad Church theology, producing a religious classic which condensed in its scant pages the essence of the ideas which were to dominate the thinking of a hundred years.