

Preaching, Conflict and Organization: Christian Universalism in the Architecture of American Christianity between Philadelphia and New England

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Abstract: This study examines the emergence and development of Christian universalism in late eighteenth-century America through a comparative analysis of Elhanan Winchester and John Murray, situating their activity within the broader framework of the “architecture of American Christianity.” Rather than treating universalism as a marginal or isolated doctrine, the article argues that it functioned as a significant theological and institutional force within a religious landscape marked by pluralism, mobility, and the absence of centralized ecclesiastical authority. Focusing on the interconnected themes of preaching, conflict, and organization, the study demonstrates that the development of universalism followed two distinct but complementary trajectories. In Philadelphia, Winchester’s universalism emerged within an established Baptist context, generating intense doctrinal controversy and institutional rupture, while simultaneously producing a sophisticated hermeneutical model that sought to reconcile biblical texts on judgment with those affirming universal restoration. In contrast, Murray’s activity in New England illustrates a more stable process of institutionalization, in which universalism, shaped by the theological influence of James Rely, was articulated in a coherent Christological framework and successfully embedded within newly formed religious communities. By comparing these two models, the article highlights the dual dynamic through which universalism became a durable feature of American religious life: as a polemical and exegetical challenge that redefined theological discourse, and as an organized movement capable of sustaining communal identity and expansion. Ultimately, the study argues that universalism played a constitutive role in shaping the architecture of American Christianity, not by resolving the tension between divine justice and universal salvation, but by preserving and intensifying it as a central theological question.

Keywords: Christian universalism, Elhanan Winchester, John Murray, American Christianity, New England, Philadelphia.

Titlu: „Predică, Conflict și Organizare: Universalismul Creștin în Arhitectura Creștinismului American între Philadelphia și New England”

Abstract: Acest studiu examinează emergența și dezvoltarea universalismului creștin în America de la sfârșitul secolului al XVIII-lea printr-o analiză comparativă a lui Elhanan Winchester și John Murray, plasând activitatea lor în cadrul mai larg al „arhitecturii creștinismului american”. În loc să trateze universalismul ca o doctrină marginală sau izolată, articolul susține că acesta a funcționat ca o forță teologică și instituțională semnificativă într-un peisaj religios caracterizat de pluralism, mobilitate și absența unei autorități ecleziastice centralizate. Concentrându-se asupra temelor interconectate ale predicii, conflictului și organizării, studiul arată că dezvoltarea universalismului a urmat două traiectorii distincte, dar complementare. În Philadelphia, universalismul lui Winchester apare în interiorul unui cadru baptist deja constituit, generând controverse doctrinare intense și rupturi instituționale, dar, în același timp, dând naștere unui model hermeneutic sofisticat, care încearcă să reconcilieze textele biblice despre judecată cu cele care afirmă restaurarea universală. În contrast, activitatea lui Murray în New England ilustrează un proces mai stabil de instituționalizare, în care universalismul, modelat de influența teologică a lui James Rely, este articulat într-un cadru cristologic coerent și integrat cu succes în comunități religioase nou formate. Prin compararea acestor două modele, articolul evidențiază dinamica dublă prin care universalismul a devenit o prezență durabilă în viața religioasă americană: ca provocare polemică și exegetică, ce a redefinit discursul teologic, și ca mișcare organizată, capabilă să susțină identitatea comunitară și expansiunea. În cele din urmă, studiul argumentează că universalismul a jucat un rol constitutiv în configurarea arhitecturii creștinismului american, nu prin rezolvarea tensiunii dintre dreptatea divină și mântuirea universală, ci prin menținerea și intensificarea acesteia ca întrebare teologică centrală.

Cuvinte-cheie: Universalism creștin, Elhanan Winchester, John Murray, Creștinism american, New England, Philadelphia.

Introduction

In the history of Western Christianity, the doctrine of universal restoration, understood as the affirmation of the final salvation of all beings, has consistently functioned as a limit-concept, situated at the intersection of theological reflection and confessional conflict. Yet this polemical visibility has not been continuous; it was preceded by a long period of relative “fertile silence” within the European context, during which the theme did not disappear but circulated in marginal, mystical, or speculative forms, without generating major doctrinal confrontations. Its explicit and conflictual rearticulation emerged with the outbreak of the Radical Reformation, when the pluralization of scriptural interpretation and the contestation of traditional authority created the conditions for the reappearance of universalism as a publicly debated and intensely disputed theological position. In this sense, the context of late eighteenth-century America does not represent an isolated rupture, but rather a continuation and amplification of these dynamics, providing one of the most fertile settings for the transformation of the doctrine into a visible and influential religious movement. In this environment, characterized by geographic mobility, confessional pluralism, and the weakening of traditional ecclesiastical authorities, the debate over the nature of salvation and the ultimate destiny of the human person does not remain an abstract issue, but becomes a central element of religious and cultural life, insofar as “arguing about hell has always been a great American pastime.”, generated by the interaction between the evangelical imperatives of conversion and the diversity of coexisting religious communities.

Within this framework, universalism should not be understood as a marginal or eccentric doctrine, but as a coherent theological response to the internal tensions of Protestantism, particularly to the difficulty of reconciling biblical affirmations concerning divine judgment with those regarding the universality of grace and reconciliation. This also explains why the doctrine emerges simultaneously in multiple forms and contexts, without initially developing into a unified system. Thus, the development of American universalism does not follow a single, continuous line, but unfolds through the convergence of distinct trajectories, the most representative of which are those associated with John Murray and Elhanan Winchester, two figures who, although they share the fundamental conviction of universal restoration, differ significantly in their theological articulation, preaching strategies, and forms of communal organization.

On the one hand, Murray represents a model of universalism that achieves relatively rapid institutional consolidation, benefiting from the favorable conditions of the New England religious landscape and from his ability to transform a controversial doctrine into an organized ecclesial movement, a process evident in the founding of the first Universalist church in America and its subsequent expansion into other regions. Pe de altă parte, Winchester ilustrează un tip diferit de dezvoltare, în care universalismul apare inițial ca o tensiune internă în cadrul comunităților baptiste, generând major doctrinal conflicts and schisms, yet – precisely through this polemical dimension – contributing to a more rigorous articulation of theological argumentation and to the expansion of the debate on the nature of salvation within the public religious sphere.

This fundamental difference between the two cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between the institutional and the polemical, but rather reflects two distinct ways of responding to the same underlying theological problem, namely the relationship between divine justice and divine love, as well as the function of punishment within the economy of salvation. While Murray tends to formulate universalism within a more stable and ecclesially coherent framework, Winchester operates within existing tensions, forcing a reinterpretation of Scripture and a redefinition of traditional theological categories, thereby transforming universalism from a mere doctrinal option into a major hermeneutical challenge for his contemporaries.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to offer a comparative analysis of the contributions of Murray and Winchester to the development of Christian universalism in early America, examining both the theological differences between these two models and their impact on the institutional and cultural configuration of the Universalist movement. Such an analysis allows not only for a more nuanced understanding of the beginnings of American universalism, but also for highlighting the fact that this doctrine does not represent a marginal deviation from the Christian tradition, but rather an expression of its internal tensions, tensions that continue to shape theological debates to this day.

This comparative approach becomes all the more necessary given that the historiography of American universalism has often tended either to privilege the institutional dimension, associated especially with the figure of John Murray, or to treat universalism as merely a doctrinal deviation within other Protestant traditions, without giving sufficient attention to the way in which it functioned as a catalyst for theological reflection and religious transformation. In reality, the development of universalism must be understood as a complex process in which

ideas circulate between Europe and America, between Baptist, Pietist, and Nonconformist milieus, and in which preaching, print culture, and geographic mobility together contribute to the formation of a religious culture in which dispute becomes a constitutive element.

In this sense, the contribution of Elhanan Winchester acquires particular significance, as he not only adopts existing ideas but introduces them into already structured communities, thereby provoking a direct confrontation between universalism and the traditional theology of eternal punishment, a confrontation which, as contemporary sources indicate, was perceived as a genuine crisis, capable of “carving a deep fissure in the Philadelphia meeting” and to transform a local dispute into a far-reaching debate on the nature of salvation.

On the other hand, the activity of John Murray highlights the way in which the same doctrine can be integrated into a more stable framework, where the emphasis falls not on the internal conflict of an existing community, but on the construction of a new religious identity, adapted to the specific conditions of emerging American society, where social mobility and the absence of a central ecclesiastical authority favor the emergence of new forms of confessional organization.

Therefore, the comparative analysis of the two figures does not aim merely to highlight biographical or doctrinal differences, but has as its primary objective the understanding of how Christian universalism takes shape both as a response to a fundamental theological problem, namely the relationship between judgment and restoration, and as a product of a specific historical context, in which interpretive diversity and the dynamics of religious communities make possible the emergence of alternative solutions.

The study will proceed by first examining the origins and formative contexts of universalism in the case of the two authors, in order to highlight the differences in religious experience and theological influences that shaped their trajectories. It will then offer a comparative analysis of the doctrinal structures they propose, with particular attention to the ways in which each interprets Scripture and redefines the function of punishment within the economy of salvation. Finally, it will assess the impact of their activity on the development of universalism in America, from both an institutional and a cultural perspective, in order to evaluate to what extent this doctrine may be understood not merely as a historical episode, but as a lasting expression of an unresolved theological debate.

The Preaching and Activity of Elhanan Winchester

The activity of Elhanan Winchester must be understood as a synthesis of revivalist preaching, theological reflection, and missionary mobility, within a religious context marked by an intense circulation of ideas and a particular sensitivity to the problem of salvation. This explains why his impact was not confined to a single community, but spread rapidly both in America and in the British context. From the early period of his activity, Elhanan Winchester stands out for a style of preaching deeply shaped by the evangelical experience of conversion, in which the affective dimension and the direct appeal to the listeners' conscience are combined with a remarkable rhetorical ability. This helps explain his success within revivalist movements and his capacity to attract large and diverse audiences.

In its initial phase, the preaching of Elhanan Winchester fits within the traditional evangelical pattern, being oriented toward the call to repentance and emphasizing the gravity of sin and the necessity of personal conversion. However, this orientation undergoes a gradual transformation with his adoption of the doctrine of universal restoration, at which point his discourse begins to integrate more and more explicitly the idea of God's universal love and the reconciling finality of the divine plan. At the same time, he does not abandon the biblical language of judgment, which gives his preaching a distinctive theological tension.

This transformation becomes especially visible during the period spent in Philadelphia, where Elhanan Winchester, serving as pastor of an influential Baptist congregation, gradually introduced universalist ideas into his preaching, provoking strong reactions from fellow ministers and congregants. The doctrine of universal restoration was perceived as a direct threat to the traditional teaching on eternal damnation; contemporary sources indicate that his preaching was considered sufficiently destabilizing as to “carry away a great part of the Church in error.” This led to the convening of a council of ministers to mediate the doctrinal conflict and, ultimately, to a schism within the community.

Following this rupture, the activity of Elhanan Winchester acquires a new dimension, as, together with his followers, he contributes to the formation of a distinct community, the Society of Universal Baptists, within which universalism is no longer a contested position but becomes the very foundation of preaching and religious life, allowing Elhanan Winchester to develop his theological discourse in a more systematic and coherent manner, free from the constraints imposed by his former confessional framework. In this context, his preaching is characterized

by a constant effort to integrate seemingly contradictory biblical texts into a unified vision of salvation, insisting that divine judgment does not contradict, but rather serves, the ultimate purpose of universal restoration.

In addition to his pastoral activity, Elhanan Winchester also stands out for his intense missionary mobility, undertaking numerous preaching journeys both in America and in England. This contributed to the spread of his ideas across a wide geographical area and to the formation of a network of supporters of universalism. In England, he did not found a new denomination, but rather acted as a propagator of an already existing doctrine, preaching in various Nonconformist congregations and attracting large audiences, especially in London, where his gatherings often reached several hundred people, an indication of the British religious milieu's receptivity to his message.

This activity is also supported by an important editorial dimension, as Elhanan Winchester published numerous theological works, the most influential of which is *The Universal Restoration* (1788), in which Elhanan Winchester systematizes his argument in favor of universal restoration, as well as in other writings devoted to the interpretation of prophecy or to the defense of the doctrine against its critics. Moreover, the launch of *The Universalist's Miscellany* in collaboration with Thomas Teulon represents an important step in consolidating an intellectual and religious network around universalism, extending the impact of his preaching through the medium of print.

A defining aspect of Elhanan Winchester's activity is his attitude toward controversy. Although involved in major theological disputes, he consistently shows a reluctance toward aggressive polemics, insisting on the need to treat opponents with respect and to avoid turning doctrinal debate into personal conflict. This lends his preaching a distinct ethical dimension and helps explain how his universalism was able to attract supporters from diverse backgrounds.

Overall, the preaching and activity of Elhanan Winchester can be characterized as profoundly dynamic and transformative, in that they not only convey a doctrine but also provoke a reconfiguration of how the relationships between judgment, grace, and the ultimate purpose of salvation are understood. In this way, he contributed to the transformation of universalism from a marginal idea into a significant presence within the late eighteenth-century Anglo-American religious landscape.

Elhanan Winchester's return to America in 1794 coincides with a significant opening of the religious landscape, in which universalism begins to gain acceptance in various circles and to develop as an organized movement. Studies of its subsequent development show that universalism expanded from New England westward, being shaped by population migration and adapted to new social conditions. In Indiana and Iowa, for example, stable institutional structures begin to emerge, including churches and regional organizations, as well as other communities along the East Coast of the United States, largely due to the preaching and activity of John Murray, which confirms the transformation of Christian universalism into a lasting religious tradition.

This development shows that universalism did not remain a marginal doctrine, but became a significant component of the American religious landscape, even though it continued to be perceived as theologically problematic. At the same time, modern historiography has emphasized that universalism was long neglected by scholars, despite its impact on the development of American Christianity.

The Preaching and Activity of John Murray

The activity of John Murray must be understood within the broader framework of the religious transformations taking place in the eighteenth-century Atlantic world, where geographic mobility, the weakening of traditional ecclesiastical authorities, and confessional pluralism created the conditions necessary for the emergence and consolidation of new forms of religious organization. Among these, universalism occupies a distinct place through its capacity to transform a controversial doctrine into a stable institutional movement.

John Murray's personal crisis, marked by the death of his wife and their child, significant financial losses, declining health, imprisonment for debt, and even episodes of suicidal thoughts, played a decisive role in his decision to leave England around 1770. John Murray's trajectory, marked by conflict and marginalization in the British context, takes a new direction with his arrival in America, where a far more fluid religious environment allows him to exercise freely his vocation as a preacher and to build around himself a community of followers. This process is facilitated by what modern studies describe as a combination of mobility and rhetorical skill, insofar as "geographic mobility and sermonic skill enabled maverick clerics to overcome professional penalties," thus giving him the opportunity to transform marginality into a form of alternative authority.

John Murray's preaching is distinguished by a strong emphasis on the Christological dimension of salvation, in which the idea of the universal representation of humanity in Christ, inherited from James Rely, plays

a central role, This occupies a central place, leading to the formulation of a form of universalism that is less dependent on a progressive process of restoration and more oriented toward affirming an already accomplished theological fact, namely, the inclusion of all humanity within the economy of salvation through the work of Christ. This orientation gives John Murray's discourse an immediate doctrinal coherence and makes it easier to integrate into a stable communal framework.

Murray rejected the idea that human beings could be punished even temporarily. For him, any post-mortem punishment would imply a denial of the efficacy of Christ's sacrifice. Because of this view, John Murray not only came into conflict with his contemporaries but also generated internal disputes within the universalist movement itself. The issue of post-mortem punishment thus became the principal point of divergence between him and other universalists.

A key moment in the activity of John Murray is the founding, in 1779, of the first organized Universalist church in America, at Gloucester, an event that marks the transition from itinerant preaching to institutionalization and that would have lasting consequences for the development of American universalism, insofar as this community became the nucleus of a religious tradition that would later expand into other regions.

In 1786, the Universalists of Gloucester successfully challenged the right of the state to levy taxes in support of the established church. In contrast to the case of Elhanan Winchester, where universalism generates conflicts and ruptures within existing structures, John Murray operates within a more permissive framework, in which he is able to build new communities without provoking the same internal tensions. This helps explain why his activity is less marked by polemic and more oriented toward consolidation and organization, contributing to the establishment of durable institutional forms of universalism.

The impact of his activity, however, extends beyond the limits of a single community, as his followers, especially from New England, become carriers of the universalist tradition in the process of westward migration, contributing to the spread of this doctrine into territories such as Ohio and Indiana, where the subsequent development of universalism is closely linked to the initial influence of John Murray's circle. In this sense, John Murray can be regarded not only as an influential preacher but also as a decisive factor in transforming universalism into an organized religious movement, capable of surviving and developing beyond the initial context in which it emerged. This significantly distinguishes him from other contemporary figures, including Elhanan Winchester, whose activity, although intense and influential, remained less stable from an institutional point of view.

The Comparative Theology of Universalism: Elhanan Winchester and John Murray

The comparison of the theologies of Elhanan Winchester and John Murray highlights the existence of two distinct models of Christian universalism which, although converging in affirming the ultimate restoration of all, differ significantly in terms of argumentative structure, biblical hermeneutics, and the understanding of the relationship between judgment and salvation.

In the case of Elhanan Winchester, universalism is the result of an integrative biblical hermeneutic that seeks to hold together both the reality of judgment and the universality of salvation, reinterpreting punishment as a corrective and temporary process, integrated into a broader divine plan of restoration. This allows him to employ both texts concerning condemnation and those concerning universal reconciliation without reducing them to mere metaphors or subordinating one set to the other. Such an approach leads to a dynamic model of salvation history, in which final restoration is the result of a progressive process.

By contrast, the universalism of John Murray is characterized by a stronger emphasis on the ontological and Christological dimension of salvation, where the focus lies on the fact that Christ, as the representative of humanity, has already accomplished salvation for all. Thus, the central issue is no longer whether salvation will occur, but how it is recognized and lived out at the individual level. This perspective reduces the importance of a restorative process and minimizes the role of punishment as a necessary stage, giving his theology a more affirmative and less tension-filled character.

In America, congregations stemming from John Murray attempted to collaborate with those founded by Elhanan Winchester, but the relationship was never easy. Murray considered Jakob Böhme to be "full of unintelligible jargon," and he wrote about Winchester:

"[He] is full of the ideas of William Law and, consequently, preaches purgatorial satisfaction. According to these gentlemen, every man must ultimately be his own Savior! If I myself must suffer as much as is necessary to satisfy divine justice, how is or how can Jesus Christ be my Savior? If this purgatorial doctrine is true, then the

ministry of reconciliation entrusted to the apostles must be false... In fact, I know of no people further from authentic Christianity than such universalists” .

The difference between the two models can also be formulated in terms of theological emphasis: if Elhanan Winchester develops a hermeneutical universalism, concerned with reconciling biblical texts and integrating scriptural tensions, John Murray, by contrast, proposes a Christological universalism, centered on the universal efficacy of Christ's work, which leads to two different ways of understanding the relationship between judgment and grace.

This difference has direct consequences for how universalism is perceived and transmitted: the theology of Elhanan Winchester, being more complex and tension-filled, stimulates debate and controversy, whereas the theology of John Murray, being more unified and affirmative, facilitates communal organization and institutional stability. This explains why the two, although upholding the same fundamental doctrine, play different roles in the development of American universalism .

Therefore, the comparative analysis shows that Christian universalism in early America cannot be reduced to a single doctrinal form, but must be understood as a field of tensions and theological variations, within which the contributions of Elhanan Winchester and John Murray represent two complementary yet distinct directions of the same unresolved theological debate.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis conducted in this study confirms that Christian universalism in early America cannot be reduced either to a merely marginal doctrine or to a unified theological construction, but must be understood as a field of tensions in which religious experience, exegetical reflection, and institutional dynamics constantly interact, generating distinct forms of articulating the same fundamental intuition regarding universal restoration. More specifically, the examination of the preaching and activity of Elhanan Winchester and John Murray has shown that the differences between them are not accidental, but derive directly from the different ways in which each arrived at universalism and from the contexts in which they were compelled to defend and transmit it.

Thus, in the case of Winchester, universalism emerges as the result of an internal tension between the evangelical experience of conversion and the theological constraints of the Calvinist framework, a tension that develops into an explicit hermeneutical crisis when confronted with European universalist literature and ultimately leads to a systematic reinterpretation of Scripture. This genesis explains why his preaching takes on a polemical and integrative character, seeking to hold together both the reality of judgment and the universality of salvation, and also why his activity in Philadelphia produces a profound institutional rupture, described by contemporaries as severe enough to “carry away a great part of the Church in error” , transforming universalism from a theological hypothesis into an urgent communal issue.

By contrast, Murray's trajectory shows that universalism can be articulated and transmitted in a more stable manner when it is adopted as an already formed theological system and integrated into a context favorable to institutional development . The influence of James Rely provided him from the outset with a coherent doctrinal framework, while the American religious environment, characterized by mobility and the absence of a central ecclesiastical authority, allowed him to build new communities without generating the same internal tensions encountered by Winchester. In this sense, Murray's ability to capitalize on mobility and rhetorical skill in order to consolidate his authority, in a context in which “geographic mobility and sermonic skill enabled maverick clerics to overcome professional penalties,” helps explain his success in institutionalizing universalism and transforming it into a lasting religious tradition.

The result of this comparison is therefore the identification of two complementary models for the development of universalism: one conflictual and hermeneutical, represented by Winchester, in which the doctrine asserts itself through confrontation and debate within existing structures, and another institutional and organizational, represented by Murray, in which the same doctrine is stabilized and expanded through the creation of new communities and ecclesial structures. These two models do not exclude one another, but rather complement each other, since universalism could not have become a significant religious movement without both the critical and polemical dimension that tests and refines its theological content, and the institutional dimension that ensures its continuity and diffusion.

Moreover, situating these observations within the broader context of the American religious landscape highlights the fact that the success of universalism cannot be separated from the specific historical conditions of

late eighteenth century America, where confessional pluralism and competition among communities encouraged the emergence of alternative interpretations of Scripture and transformed theological disputes into a constitutive element of religious life. In this sense, the conflict in Philadelphia, described as a deep fissure within the Baptist community, is not an exception, but a symptom of a religious culture in which debate over the nature of salvation was both inevitable and necessary.

Finally, what emerges from this analysis is that Christian universalism, as expressed in the activity of Elhanan Winchester and John Murray, does not offer a definitive solution to the problem of the relationship between judgment and restoration, but rather keeps this problem open, compelling theology to continually confront the tension between divine justice and divine love. It is precisely this capacity to sustain the debate without reducing it to a simplified formula that explains why universalism does not belong exclusively to the past, but continues to represent a relevant theological challenge, confirming its character as an ongoing and unresolved theological dispute.

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