

UNIVERSALISM

&

DR. GEORGE DE BENNEVILLE

(1703 – 1793)

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PREFACE & APOLOGIAS

I have selected my topic for purely personal reasons. I am taking this opportunity to look into a subject about which I have always been curious. I hope my subject, which involves religion and family, may be interesting to others. If not, my apologies.

As to religion, you needn't worry – I won't be proselytizing. I will be discussing a religion whose church I have never attended, except once for a wedding, but whose founding fathers include an ancestor eight generations before mine. Thus I will also piece together a biography of this remarkable man, Dr. George deBenneville, my great-great-great-great-grandfather. This is written as much for the next generation, my nieces and nephews, who did not have the benefit of my grandmother's stories, as for myself.

The de Benneville name continues in my family. My great-uncle was George deBenneville Keim IV. I was baptized Leslie de Benneville Miller in a French Huguenot church in Charleston, South Carolina, which has a brass plaque to Dr. George de Benneville on its wall.

The family story has been that de Benneville was a (or *the*) founder of the Universalist Church, which was organized as a denomination in the 18th century and merged with the Unitarian Church in 1960. I have always wondered what the basic tenets of Universalism (as well as Unitarianism) are; why, when and how the two churches merged; and what role de Benneville played in the Universalist Church.

Growing up I heard many stories about de Benneville and other notable ancestors from my grandmother, who was, I confess, a “genealogy snob.” I have since learned that some of her stories were a bit exaggerated. I have taken this opportunity to separate fact from fiction and piece together the real story of Dr. George de Benneville (1703 – 1793), which is, indeed, remarkable.

RELIGION

UNIVERSALISM AND UNITARIANISM: THE BASICS

As organized Protestant denominations, both the Universalist and Unitarian Churches were American creations. They were both founded in New England in the 1700s. From their beginnings, both the Universalists and Unitarians had more in common with each other than with the strongly doctrinal Calvinist and Catholic churches. Yet they still differed significantly in culture and theology, with the Universalists being more working class and more Christ-centered.

As religious philosophies, both universalism and unitarianism pre-date their respective churches by centuries. The basic tenet of universalist ideology is the belief in universal salvation; that is, that everyone will go to heaven. Universalists believe in a loving God who would not condemn anyone to suffer an eternity in hell. Furthermore, salvation is truly universal and would be achieved by all people, regardless of their faith.

Classic unitarianism holds that all “gods” are really one God, who is known by many names; that there is truth to be found in many religions. They believe that it is better to follow Jesus and live by his example than to worship him. Believers in both universalism and unitarianism, including my ancestor, preached and wrote about their faith long before there was an organized church of either sect.

EARLY HISTORY OF UNIVERSALIST IDEOLOGY

During the first three centuries of the Christian church, believers could choose from a variety of tenets about Jesus. Christianity lost this element of choice in 325 AD with the Council of Nicaea, organized by the Holy Roman Emperor Constantine. This Council formulated the Nicene Creed, which established the Trinity as dogma, as well as the organizational hierarchy of priests, bishops and pope who placed themselves between God and laymen. For centuries thereafter, people who professed unitarian or universalist beliefs were persecuted as heretics.

The first clearly universalist writings date from the Greek church fathers of the 3rd century (Clement of Alexandria, Origen and Gregory of Nyssa.). Universalism almost disappeared during the Middle Ages, except for the Irish scholar Erigena and some lesser-known mystics. Both Protestant reformers, such as Luther and Calvin, as well as the Catholic Church, rejected the idea of final salvation for all. Those who professed belief in universalism were condemned and persecuted.

During the 16th century the doctrine was embraced by a group of German scholars. Their teachings were a refreshing alternative to the harsh, puritanical teachings of other Christian churches of the day, which spoke of hellfire and eternal damnation. Wittgenstein (North Rhine, Westphalia, Germany) became one of the few places on the European continent that Universalists (and Pietists, Bohemians, Moravians, Quakers and similar believers) were protected. The Duke of Wittgenstein granted religious freedom and sanctuary to refugees in 1698. His widow continued this policy during her administration as Regent for her son, whom she reared as a Pietist.

After being condemned to death by the Catholics in France, and excommunicated by the Calvinists in England, de Benneville emigrated to Germany. During his 18 years there, he became a medical doctor and preached universalism. In 1741 de Benneville followed others who had emigrated to Pennsylvania, attracted by the religious tolerance of William Penn, a Quaker.

UNIVERSALISTS ORGANIZE AS A DENOMINATION

The first Universalists in America, including George de Benneville, founded no churches in the usual sense. They preached in informal home settings or en plein air. By 1790 there were perhaps no more than two dozen Universalist societies in existence, sharing their vision of “hope, not hell.” Subscribers to the doctrine were found in significant numbers throughout New England, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey.

The time seemed ripe to organize. Accordingly, a convention was called to draw together Universalists to adopt a statement of faith and a plan of government that would provide a helpful model for local societies and encourage cooperation between them. After two weeks, the Philadelphia Convention, as it has come to be known, agreed on **Articles of Faith**, a Plan of Church Government, and resolutions on “War, Going to Law, Holding Slaves, Oaths and Submission to Government.” The plan of church government adopted was similar to that of the Congregational Church. For reasons beyond my understanding, this meeting was not considered the beginning of the organized church.

That accolade goes to a meeting held in 1793 in Oxford, MA, and moderated by John Murray, who called for a day of preaching, prayer, fellowship, mutual support and organizational business. Those present called the meeting a “General Convention of the Universal Churches and Societies in Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut, and New York.” This meeting is generally agreed to mark the beginning of a new Protestant denomination.

WHO WAS THE FOUNDER OF THE ORGANIZED UNIVERSALIST CHURCH?

John Murray (1741-1815), moderator of the 1793 Oxford convention, is regularly referred to as the founder of the organized Universalist Church. Murray had been excommunicated from the Methodist Church for his universalist ideas and had spent a term in debtors’ prison. Although not noted as an original thinker, he was a moving preacher and gained great influence in Universalist circles. He was basically a Calvinist who had modified his theology to include all people within God’s elect who would get to heaven.

A footnote in the translation from French of de Benneville’s personal manuscripts asks the question: “Who was the founder of Universalism in America?” The response: “As far as our research extends, we find the popular belief, that John Murray was the *first* preacher and defender of “Restorationism,” to be erroneous. There is incontrovertible evidence that Dr. de Benneville antedated Murray as a preacher of Universal Restoration by many years, both in Europe and America. As early as 1745...he was a zealous and

fearless advocate of its tenets, and preached in his own house, in a room devoutly set apart for the purpose, 'without money and without price,' *twenty-five years prior to John Murray's emigration to America and when that celebrated expounder of Universalism was but four years of age.*" (italics original)

EVOLUTION OF UNIVERSALIST IDEOLOGY IN AMERICA: CONSERVATIVE & LIBERAL MOOD SWINGS

The first group-formulated Articles of Faith (1790) were written in quite general terms because of the theological differences among the delegates of the Philadelphia Convention. The Articles stated that the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments contain a revelation of the perfections and will of God; that there is One God, infinite in all his perfections; that Jesus is the mediator between God and man; that they believe in the Holy Ghost; and that there is an obligation to do good works. Early Universalism was clearly Christ-centered, much like Calvinism with the guaranteed hope of final redemption.

Beliefs often varied considerably from congregation to congregation, because early ministers were self-appointed, there was no Universalist Creed, and church organization was always decentralized. In general, however, Universalist leanings underwent several major swings, from conservative, to liberal, back to conservative, then back to liberal again, with the conservative wing being strongly Christian oriented, and the liberal wing more accepting of other religious thought, more similar to the Unitarians.

After Murray, Hosea Ballou (1771-1852) became the most influential preacher of the second generation of the Universalist Church. He was a creative, original thinker, influenced by the writings of deistic rationalists such as Ethan Allen and Thomas Paine, yet thoroughly committed to the authority of the Bible as the source of revelation.

Murray and Ballou represented opposite ends of the conservative-liberal spectrum, with Murray on the conservative end and Ballou on the liberal. In 1805 Ballou published *A Treatise on Atonement*. In it, he developed the innovative theological views that he had begun to preach a decade earlier, which had so distressed Murray. In the *Treatise*, Ballou openly ridiculed the doctrine of the Trinity. Regarding the crucifixion, Ballou said “the literal death of the man, Christ Jesus, is figurative.” Ballou avowed that God’s atoning love is not reserved just for Christians: “this love, which is the spirit of the life of Jesus Christ, is not confined particularly to names, sects, denominations, people, or kingdoms.” Ballou pleads with his fellow Universalists for tolerance and open-mindedness: “Be cautious of any system of divinity.” This treatise put great stress on the use of reason in interpreting the Scriptures, and it made an immediate and lasting impact. It radically altered the thinking of many of his colleagues in the ministry and their congregations. The *Treatise* has since gone through sixteen editions.

The liberal wing of the church clearly became the dominant force in 1803, when the New England Convention (an annual assembly) met in Winchester, NH, with 38 societies represented. The delegates adopted a Profession of Belief, which came to be known as the **Winchester Profession** (or the **Profession**) and would serve the denomination for 96 years.

The new Articles of Faith adopted in Winchester were similar to those adopted in 1790 regarding the Holy Scriptures, one Supreme Being and good works, however this time there were no articles professing Jesus to be the mediator between God and man and no mention of the Holy Ghost. An additional clause, which became known as the **Liberty Clause**, was adopted: “we leave it to the several Churches and Societies, or to smaller associations of churches...to continue or adopt within themselves, such more particular articles of faith...as may appear to them best under their particular circumstances, provided they do not disagree with our general Profession...” This clause was often invoked in defense of freedom of conscience.

Tension between the conservatives and liberals was kindled by a debate in 1817 over whether those who died would be punished for their sins before entering heaven. Murray, et al (including deBenneville, now deceased) had contended that souls of the dead must undergo purification in hell before entering heaven. Ballou argued that the carnal nature of man, inclined to sinfulness, is destroyed by death, while the spiritual nature, committed to moral goodness, survives.

In the late 1800's there was a general shift back to conservatism in the denomination. A new Statement of Faith adopted in the General Convention of 1848 required all candidates to the ministry to acknowledge that the Bible contained a special revelation from God. A new constitution was written in 1870 that excluded the Liberty Clause. For the first time, affirmation of the Profession was made a specific requirement for ministerial fellowship. What had for 67 years been a very general statement became something close to a creed.

When Herman Bisbee, a graduate of the theological school at St Lawrence, said it was quite sufficient to accept the Bible as containing a revelation, without accepting it as literally true or infallible, he was thoroughly criticized. Editorials in the *Universalist Register* claimed "the Universalist Church is a Christian Church, unqualifiedly such," and reaffirmed the denomination as a Bible-based faith.

By the end of the 19th century, the progressive wing was again gaining momentum. A new "Creed and Conditions of Fellowship" brought back the Liberty Clause. The earlier Profession was commended, but it was made clear that it did not constitute a creed: "neither this nor any other precise form of words is required as a condition of fellowship."

In 1893 the first **World's Parliament of Religions**, held in Chicago as part of the Chicago World's Fair, attracted 150,000 people over 17 days and was called "the greatest religious event of the nineteenth century." An immediate result was the formation of the American Congress of Liberal Religious Societies "to unite in a larger fellowship and

cooperation, such existing societies and liberal elements as are in sympathy with the movement toward undogmatic religion; to develop the church of humanity, democratic in organization, progressive in spirit, cherishing the spiritual traditions of the past, but keeping itself open to all new light and the higher developments of the future.” (Known as the **Liberal Congress**). By 1895, 17 societies had joined the Liberal Congress: six Universalist and three Unitarian churches; three Jewish congregations; the Ethical Culture Society; a Quaker meeting; the Independent Liberal Church, the People’s Church and the All Souls Church.

The World’s Parliament of Religions, the Liberal Congress, and the restoration of the Liberty Clause combined to bring the Universalists and Unitarians closer together as the nineteenth century ended. The secretary of the American Unitarian Association suggested in 1899 that “the time has come for a closer and more cordial cooperation with our brethren of the Universalist fellowship.

By the first half of the 20th century, the liberal wing was well entrenched. Robert Cummins, the new General Superintendent, stated “Universalism cannot be limited either to Protestantism or to Christianity, not without denying its very name. Ours is a world fellowship, not just a Christian sect. For so long as Universalism is universalism and not partialism, the fellowship bearing its name must succeed in making it unmistakably clear that all are welcome: theist and humanist, unitarian and trinitarian, colored and colorless.”

Charles Skinner emerged as a force for change in the denomination. Although he expressed his theology in marginally Christian terms, at heart it was a social action-oriented global humanism that stressed “a spiritual interpretation of the whole of life.” For Skinner, a truly universal religion had to be “founded upon a twentieth century psychology and theology, a religion which is throbbing with the dynamics of democracy, a spirituality which expresses itself in terms of humanism.”

Post World War II, a new liberal wing of young ministers emerged that continued to move the denomination beyond Christianity to universal religion. A symposium on “One World Religion” issued a call to transform Universalism into a religion for one world, which, while honoring its Christian origins, nevertheless would welcome the truths of other religions on an equal basis. The authors were calling for a universalizing of Universalism. The ideological chasm between Universalists and Unitarians, at once very great, was disappearing.

SOCIAL ACTIVISM

From its very beginnings, the Universalist church welcomed the marginal and dispossessed in society. Unlike the Unitarian church fathers, mostly Harvard educated and upper class, the early Universalist ministers were uneducated farmers and itinerant tradesmen. The first Articles of Faith, promulgated in 1790, had a section entitled “Of Good Works” professing the obligation of moral law as the rule of life. The duty to do “good works” was reaffirmed in all future rewritings of the Articles of Faith, whether done when the liberals or the conservatives held sway.

In the first part of the 19th century, as the denomination started to grow, it began to apply its commitment to “practice good works” to society at large. One of the first areas they determined to affect was education. Universalists strongly supported the move for tax-supported public schools. At the same time, they supported separation of church and state, and wanted no religious instruction in public schools.

Universalists spoke out for the abolition of slavery and war, for temperance, women’s rights, prison reform, the rehabilitation of prisoners, and the abolition of capital punishment. In 1840 the Universalist Anti-Slavery Convention was held in Lynn, MA, pre-dating the Civil War by over twenty years.

The denomination's work in women's rights first focused on women's efforts to receive ordination to the ministry. The Universalists were the first denomination to have a female minister.

By the latter half of the 19th century, women's rights and temperance stood out as the major Universalist social concerns. The General Convention unanimously passed a resolution for the abolition of the death penalty; called for the enactment of just and uniform divorce laws and reaffirmed the sanctity of marriage; proclaimed "its world-wide sympathy with poor, unfortunate, struggling humanity" and called on all Universalists to cooperate "with all movements and purposes for the prevention of cruelty of children and animals."

Around the turn of the century, much of the energy put into social reform was diverted to social service in local communities: settlement houses; homes for orphans; homes for young women; homes for the aging and infirm.

By the 20th century, the Universalists had evolved to the Unitarian point of view that it was better to live as Jesus would, to use his life as a role model, than to worship him.

UNITARIAN - UNIVERSALIST MERGER

In spite of its growth, the Universalist Church always remained a marginal denomination when compared to other Protestant sects. Although the Unitarians and Universalists had flirted and discussed cooperation as far back as the 19th century, in their early days their differences in ideology and culture were too extreme to take any merger seriously.

Thomas Starr King (1824-1864), a minister in both the denominations, said they were "too near of kin to be married." When asked to explain the difference between them, he replied that the Universalists thought that God was too good to damn them forever, while the Unitarians thought that they were too good to be damned. (Thomas Starr King also authored *The White Hills*, which popularized tourism in the White Mountains.)

The Church fell into decline between the two world wars. Three factors contributed to this: (1) sociologically, the migration to the cities left many of the rural churches without the critical mass to sustain themselves; (2) organizationally, the denomination remained crippled by its distrust of centralized power; (3) theologically it had to confront such basic questions as whether it still had a unique, relevant doctrine to proclaim. Financial problems were exacerbated during the Depression. During this difficult period, the Universalists were courted by both the Unitarians and the Congregationalists, and both were open to the possibility of complete merger.

The Unitarians and Universalists formed a joint commission in 1931 to study three alternatives: (1) maintain the status quo; (2) complete merger; or (3) formation of a larger fellowship that would include all religious liberals in one great umbrella organization. The commission recommended the third option, having recognized that basic, unbridgeable differences still existed between the views of freedom held by the two denominations: the Unitarians saw their freedom as unlimited, while the Universalists recognized that their freedom, while broad, was nevertheless restricted by their Statement of Belief.

In 1958 Frederick May Eliot, president of the American Unitarian Association, and Robert Cummins, the Universalist General Superintendent, recommended taking a poll of the churches in both denominations about whether they wanted to discuss the possibility of merger. The Joint Merger Commission met and prepared a detailed manual titled "Merger and Alternatives." It presented two basic plans and four alternatives. Plans: (1) complete merger of the two denominations; (2) expansion of the Council of Liberal Churches. Alternatives: (1) maintenance of status quo; (2) withdrawal of cooperation; (3) formation of an interdenominational council of liberal religious groups; (4) establishment of a committee on cooperation among liberal religious groups. In the plebiscite, approximately three-fourths of the churches voted for complete merger.

Unitarians and Universalists had been talking about merger on and off for a century. Up to this point theological, sociological and educational differences had kept them apart. Now those differences had been largely overcome. Unitarians had moved beyond their humanist-theist controversy of the 1920s and 1930s. Universalists had moved beyond their exclusively Christian orientation. In the process, both bodies had become more willing to accept diversity within their ranks.

In a 1960 plebiscite, 79% of the Universalist and 91% of Unitarian societies voted to merge.

1960 PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE AT THE MERGER OF UNITARIANS AND UNIVERSALISTS

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, and welcoming into fellowship all men of whatever background of faith, here together on this night of Consolidation, conscious of the presence of the past, and of our urgent tasks, dedicate ourselves anew to the free and universal fellowship of all mankind that is the church to be.

SET OF PRINCIPLES ADOPTED IN 1985

We, the member congregations of the Unitarian Universalist Association, covenant to affirm and promote:

- The inherent worth and dignity of every person
- Justice, equity and compassion in human relations
- Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations
- A free and responsible search for truth and meaning
- The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large
- The goal of world community with peace, liberty and justice for all
- Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are part.

The living tradition we share draws from many sources:

- Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit...
- Words and deeds of prophetic women and men...
- Wisdom of the world's religions...
- Jewish and Christian teachings...
- Humanist teachings....

FAMILY

DR. GEORGE DE BENNEVILLE (1703 – 1793)
(referred to as deB)

FAMILY BACKGROUND, ENGLAND

The father of George de Benneville was a nobleman and Calvinist from Rouen, Normandy. The de Benneville family had always been loyal to King and country and had lived in peace with their Catholic relatives and neighbors. However, after Louis XIV ended all pretense of toleration toward Protestants by revoking the Edict of Nantes, persecution of Protestants became rampant. The de Benneville chateau was attacked in 1688. At the invitation of King William III, he moved his family to London, where he was employed at Court.

George's mother was an English lady from the prominent Granville family. Her close relative, Sir George Granville, was Comptroller and Treasurer of the Queen's Household. His mother was an intimate friend of the future Queen Anne, a fact which later saved George's life. (Anne was Mary's sister and heir to William III & Mary, since they had no children.)

George was the youngest of nine children born in five years of marriage. His mother, having given birth to four sets of twins in four successive years, died giving birth to George. Queen Anne, who ascended to the throne the year before George's birth, was his godmother. She personally provided a nurse for him at his mother's death.

CONVERSION TO UNIVERSALISM

In his own words, deB "was very wild, believing myself to belong to a different class from mankind in general. I was self-exalted, and thought myself above other men." At a young age, however, deB had a dramatic conversion to universalism, and his life was forever changed. At the age of 12, he was sent to sea to learn navigation with a small fleet on a diplomatic mission to the Barbary Coast. While in Algiers, he observed the

behavior of some Moors whose friend had fallen and injured a leg. They kissed the wound to sympathize with him, shed tears upon it for the salty water to help in a cure, and “turned toward the rising sun and cried out to invoke Him who created the sun to have compassion for their friend and be pleased to heal him.” Having seen this, deB remarked “Are these men Heathens? No, I confess before God that they are Christians and I myself am a Heathen.” This notion, that heathens could behave in a more Christianlike manner than proper Christians, was indeed heretical at the time.

Back in England, deB resumed the gay life of an aristocrat. At a ball he became overheated and ordered his servant to prepare a change of linen. As he was putting it on, deB fell in a faint and had a vision of himself “burning as a firebrand in hell.” This was followed by a period of deep depression, during which he felt oppressed by unforgivable sins and “desired to die.” After 15 months he had another vision in which Jesus told him “take courage my son, thy sins are forgiven thee.” “Immediately all the burden of my sins and iniquities was removed, all the stings and reproaches ceased, a living faith came in their stead, and the tears of sorrow were all wiped from my eyes.” From this point on, deB devoted his life to preaching the salvation of all souls. (the Everlasting Gospel)

When he was interrogated about his conversion experience, deB told the ministers of the French Calvinist church in London that because he, the greatest of sinners, had been saved, “I could not have a doubt but the whole world would be saved by the same power.” The Calvinists, who believed in predestination and could not accept the idea of salvation for all souls, then apologetically denied him membership in their church. DeB replied that he “was very well satisfied to be cast out, and my consolation was that they were unable to blot my name out of the Book of Life.”

THE FRENCH YEARS (1720-1723)

After his excommunication, deB “received a voice of grace inwardly to go and preach the Gospel in France,” but fear of persecution made him waver. (During the Inquisition, Protestants were brutally tortured and killed.) After a personal struggle over fear vs duty,

“though with fear and trembling,” he set sail for Calais and immediately began to preach in the marketplace. As soon as he finished, he was taken before a magistrate and then conducted to prison, where “all fear of persecution vanished.” Since it was his first offense, he was sentenced to eight days’ imprisonment and warned that if he were caught again, his life would be in peril.

With adolescent zeal (he was 17), deB continued to preach in Normandy, gathering with like-minded people in groups of up to 400 “in mountains and woods.” Often they were betrayed and some taken prisoner. “Many were hanged, others whipped by the hands of the hangman and branded with a hot iron, all of their property was confiscated, and they were sent on board of the galleys; yet this did not terrify or weaken us.” After about two years, deB was surrounded by a party of soldiers one day near Dieppe, and he and an M Durant were taken prisoners, along with many others.

After a month in the Bastille, both deB and Durant were condemned to death. Durant was sentenced to be hanged and deB to be beheaded. They were led together to the place of execution, where “M. Durant sang the 116th Psalm when on the ladder, and died joyfully.” DeB was then led to the scaffold. His eyes were ordered to be bound, but at his request that was not done. He then fell to his knees, prepared to die. While the executioner was binding his hands, a courier arrived from Louis XV with a reprieve. DeB’s Catholic relatives had appealed to the British Ambassador to establish the fact that deB was a British citizen and, as such, could not be guilty of treason against France. He was then led back to the Bastille for some time, until finally liberated through the intercession of Queen Anne.

THE YEARS IN GERMANY (C 1723-1741)

After his release from prison, deB moved to Germany where he was particularly associated with a celibate community of Pietists in Berleberg, Wittgenstein. The tolerant precincts of Wittgenstein attracted religious radicals – Dunkers, Schwenkfelders, Philadelphians and Rosicrucians. The Pietists stressed inward faith and de-emphasized

the outward forms of religion such as ritual, doctrine and literalism. Among the ideas many of them shared were pacifism, universalism, mysticism, perfectionism, separation of church and state, and communalism. DeB traveled around Germany and Holland preaching in German, French and Dutch.

After 18 years in Germany, deB underwent a second life-changing experience. He fell ill with fever and was “reduced almost to a skeleton.” Near death, he entered a dreamlike state where inhabitants, “clothed in garments as white as snow,” proclaimed to him the good news of “the restoration of all the human species without exception.” After saying goodbye to his friends, deB felt himself “die by degrees” and felt his spirit depart from his body. He was escorted by guardians through the regions traditionally called “heaven” and “hell.” In hell, his compassion was such that “I took it so to heart that I believed my happiness would be incomplete while one creature remained miserable.” One of his guardians comforted him with a vision of the eventual restoration of all life, ie the basic tenet of universalism. During this vision, a messenger told him to return to his “earthly habitation, and to preach to the lower world the universal and everlasting Gospel that the most Holy Trinity hath a boundless, universal love towards all the human race, without exception.”

Forty-two hours after he had been declared dead, deB awoke in his coffin. He returned to life with a renewed mission: to preach that God’s love for all would lead to salvation for all. That deB had apparently risen from the dead and resumed preaching, to larger crowds than before, was a cause of concern for both secular and religious authorities. Once again he was imprisoned, but only briefly.

During the 2nd quarter of the 18th century, many Germans from Wittgenstein and elsewhere emigrated to America. Some, including deB, were attracted by reports of Johann Christoph Sauer (1695-1758), a universalist Pietist from Wittgenstein who had gone to Germantown, Pennsylvania and started a printing business. Sauer described Pennsylvania as an “earthly paradise” where there was complete freedom. One could live there “as a good Christian in solitude, as one pleased.” At this time William Penn, a

Quaker and founder of Pennsylvania, offered religious tolerance not found in the Calvinist-dominated states.

LIFE IN AMERICA (1741-1793)

DeB had assisted many Schwenkfelders and other religious refugees to emigrate to America. In 1741 he made the move himself. At some point (probably in Germany or Holland) deB had received a doctorate in medicine. Hearing of the religious and medical needs of recently settled Schwenkfelder and Huguenot communities, and commissioned to help Sauer's publication program, deB felt "an overwhelming divine call to go to America."

In another mystical experience, Sauer was alerted by a dream to hitch his horses to his carriage, proceed to a certain wharf in Philadelphia, seven miles away, inquire on board a ship that had just arrived for a man who was ill, and to convey him to Germantown and take special care of him. Pursuing his instructions, Sauer found everything as described and brought the sick man, de Benneville, to his home, where he nursed him back to health. While there, deB helped prepare the Sauer Bible, the first German language Bible printed in America. DeB marked the passages most favorable to universalism, which Sauer then set in boldface.

While staying with Sauer, deB met Jean Bertolet, who had settled in the Oley Valley of Pennsylvania. Bertolet convinced deB to move there to serve as physician and tutor. Three years later, in 1745, deB married Bertolet's daughter Esther. They had seven children, six living to be adults.

The deB family built a home in the Oley Valley, then considered frontier, with space for deB's medical practice and a large room that functioned both as a school and a church, seating at least fifty people. DeB also preached at the Moravian mission station three miles away and maintained relations with the Dunkers and other German sects that permitted belief in universal restoration.

DeB also maintained friendly relations with local Native Americans and learned to use many of their herbal remedies. He tried to learn their language and symbols. His manuscript lexicon of English and German definitions of Indian words and phrases shows a remarkable understanding of the cultural heritage and religious views of the natives. Because he believed all symbols had equal merit, he could converse across cultures and religions. During one of his preaching tours into western Pennsylvania, he entered an Indian village where many were ill. He remained among them until they were well. On another occasion he found the settlers of one frontier community alarmed by the threat of an Indian attack. DeB went alone and unarmed to the Indian camp, smiling with outstretched arms, palms up, as he approached. The Indians realized his peaceful intention, and deB was able to diffuse the situation.

After Jean Bertolet, his father-in-law, died in 1757, the deB family moved to Bristol Township near Philadelphia (now known as the Oak Lane section of Philadelphia). In 1758 he purchased a 22 acre plantation five miles from the Philadelphia city hall, two miles from Germantown. Later he bought a home from Benjamin Rush, friend and signer of the Declaration of Independence. Benjamin Franklin was also a friendly neighbor.

DeB continued his medical practice and operated an apothecary shop. At one point in his medical career he wrote six or seven large quarto volumes on known medical remedies of the day, writing in parallel columns in English, German and Latin. During his first months of residence in the Philadelphia area, deB gave medical care to victims of small pox among the Acadian French refugees from Nova Scotia.

Although an old man at the time, the American Revolution did not pass him by. Because of its exposed position on the main road from Philadelphia to New York, the deB farm was visited by foraging parties from every army unit in the area. More than once he drove his cows into the parlor to protect them from being seized. When the British established an army encampment at nearby Germantown, deB took his wife and daughter to Reading for safety. On his return, he found Scottish Highlanders camped on his land.

They made it their headquarters until some time after the Battle of Germantown. Before the Battle of Germantown had ended, deB was on the battlefield ministering to the wounded and dying men of both armies.

When a small detachment of Americans was ambushed at a spring near the deB farm, some of the survivors made their way to his home to have their wounds attended to. When an alarm was given that British soldiers were approaching, deB cleaned up the bloodstains and hid the soldiers. Their muskets were buried in a woodshed until an opportunity arose to return them to the American army.

After the surrender of Burgoyne at Saratoga, two deserters gained entrance to the deB home. They beat his wife about the head with an iron candlestick until she was unconscious, then forced deB to lead them upstairs with a candle. Young George, his son, then leaped from a second story porch, ran to a neighbor, obtained a gun, and returned to defend his parents. The robbers fled, but young George captured one. According to one report, deB refused to testify against his abuser because burglary was a capital offence, and he did not approve of capital punishment.

In an ironic turn of events, when he was 81 years old (1783), deB's services were solicited by Louis XVI. A royal commission visited him in Philadelphia to request his return to France as an advisor to the monarch. The kingdom was menaced by internal dissensions, and French officers who had served in the American Revolution suggested that the restoration of religious liberty would eliminate one source of danger to the realm. His advanced years and physical infirmities precluded such a possibility. He may also have feared foul play.

Although a man of deep faith, deB "was not an iconoclast, nor a revolutionary, nor a controversialist; but a gentle, tolerant, friendly soul who lived his religion." Hosea Ballou wrote of him "if there was one Christian attribute that transcended all others in Dr. deB's character, it was humility...I bless God that I was ever acquainted with Dr George

deB, for such an humble, pious, and loving man I have scarcely ever seen in my pilgrimage through life.”

DeB continued practicing medicine and sharing his Universalist beliefs into old age, writing at age 88 “my mind is still set to preach the gospel.” He died of a stroke in 1793, aged 90, and his wife died two years later. Although born into nobility and raised in the English court, he requested that his grave be of the severest simplicity and that his internment take place at sunset, “in the dusk of the evening, in quietness and simplicity, without pomp, noise, or parade.”

SELECTIONS FROM THE WRITINGS OF
DR GEORGE DE BENNEVILLE
THAT BRANDED HIM A HERETIC AND PUT HIS LIFE AT PERIL

Preach the Universal and Everlasting Gospel of Boundless, Universal Love for the entire human race, without exception, and for each one in particular.

He will restore all of His creatures, without exception, to the praise of His glory and their eternal salvation.

It is not possible for there to be two contrary Deities, a good God and a bad one; nor two sorts of creatures, both of truly divine origin, some made good by God, and others bad.

Literalism destroys true religion by substituting for the spiritual reality the symbol by which it is represented. Religious words are not religion. The word “apple” or the likeness of an apple printed upon paper is not an apple, for it would taste like paper and printers’ ink, and not have the flavor or texture of an apple.

A feeling of security is strengthened in some by the delusion that it suffices to attend meetings for worship and be received into membership by a certain people. Others put their trust in literal perception, concepts, and ideas of faith. But something vastly different is essential for salvation, namely, a deep, genuine, fundamental realization of one’s condition. A change of heart and mind follows. Then Christ lives in us and we in Him, and our thought, speech and work will be in harmony with His will.

The Inner Spirit makes men feel that behind every appearance of diversity there is an interdependent unity of all things.

Our faith is essentially the combined faith of all Christians, and instead of increasing the divided churches, it is to unite them all into one, as truth alone grants. As no church is pure in all things, so none can be found that does not contain some truth. Glorious truths are found in every church and religion under the sun.

The spirit of Love will be intensified to Godly proportions when reciprocal love exists between the entire human race and each of its individual members. That love must be based upon mutual respect for the differences in color, language and worship, even as we appreciate and accept with gratitude the differences that tend to unite the male and the female of all species. We do not find those differences obstacles to love.

Negroes should be educated as teachers, physicians, and missionaries, or taught useful trades, and encouraged to share their knowledge with their brethren in Africa.

My happiness will be incomplete while one creature remains miserable.

God judges men by their deeds and not by their creeds. The language of eternal love is expressed in actions. These speak more than all words.

Translation of the inscriptions on the silver knife and fork presented by Queen Anne:
“Who trusts in God has built well. Who lives well dies well.”

DEFINITIONS, INTERESTING FACTOIDS AND TRIVIA

- **John Calvin** (1509-1564) was a French theologian who spread the Protestant Reformation in France and Switzerland, where he established a strict Presbyterian government in Geneva. **Calvinism** held that the state should aid the church and that the sacraments were of value but not essential. Calvinists also believed in predestination: that only those whom God specifically elects are saved, that this election is irresistible, and that individuals can do nothing to effect this salvation. This was the major point the Universalists disagreed with. Calvinism greatly influenced the Puritans of New England.
- **Huguenots** were the Calvinist Protestants in France during the religious struggles of the 16th and 17th centuries. Their numbers grew in the late 16th century and their rivalry with the Catholics led to the Wars of Religion (1562-1598). They triumphed when Henri IV succeeded to the throne (1589) and established religious toleration protected by the Edict of Nantes (1598). The revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 by Louis XIV led to persecution of French Protestants and caused many Huguenots to flee the country.
- **Pietism** was a movement in the Lutheran Church, most influential between the latter part of the 17th and the middle of the 18th century, which stressed personal feeling rather than dogma and intellectual truth in religious devotion. It was an effort to stir the church out of a settled attitude in which dogma and intellectual religion seemed to be supplanting the precepts of the Bible and religion of the heart. Although the movement bore resemblance to aspects of Puritanism, e.g., use of distinctive dress and the renunciation of worldly pleasures, the essential aim of the true Pietist was to place the spirit of Christian living above the letter of doctrine.
- **Deism** is a belief in God reached through natural and scientific observation. This rationalistic religion, first prevalent in the 17th and 18th centuries and expounded

by Voltaire, Montesquieu and Rousseau, accepted the idea of God as creator of the universe, but rejected the idea that God might break the scientific laws governing the universe.

- **John Murray** (usually cited as the founder of the Universalist Church) returned from a voyage to England on a ship with John and Abigail Adams. He was invited to preach one Sunday to the passengers and crew. Apparently the crew liked his message; however, Abigail thought his sermon “a sort of familiar talking without any kind of dignity.” Murray renewed his friendship with Adams after Adams was elected president. Adams flattered him by claiming that Murray had performed “a great feat – next to a miracle” by enticing Vice President Thomas Jefferson to come to church to hear him preach.
- **Joseph Priestly** (scientist who discovered oxygen and clergyman) founded Unitarian Churches in Philadelphia and Northumberland, PA in 1794.
- **James II** converted to Catholicism in 1672. Repeated attempts were made to exclude him from the succession before his father, Charles II, died, however he ascended to the throne in 1685. James II promptly embarked on a policy which was aimed at achieving arbitrary power for himself and the conversion of England to Roman Catholicism. The country opposed this and invited his son-in-law and nephew, William, Prince of Orange, to take over the throne. The invasion which followed met practically no resistance. James fled to France, where he died in 1701. William reigned (1689-1702) as William III with his wife, Mary II.
- **William and Mary** left no children and the throne passed to Mary’s sister, Anne, who was a devoted supporter of the Church of England. Anne had 17 children, all of whom died in infancy or early childhood.

- The Huguenot church in Charleston, SC, where I was baptized, was completed in 1845 and was the first gothic building in Charleston. The current building is the 3rd on the site. Huguenots were worshipping there as early as 1687. There is, indeed, a bronze plaque to Dr George de Benneville, in the front/right of the church. However, plaques to Huguenots were installed through a fundraising effort, generally purchased by family members of a Huguenot ancestor. It is unlikely that de Benneville ever went to South Carolina.
- Social class was the reason de Benneville was sentenced to be guillotined and M Durant to be hung for the same crime. Durant, from Genoa, was not of the nobility. To be guillotined was considered an honor.
- Esther Bertolet (deB's wife) was born August 20, 1720 in Germany of Jean and Susanna. Her parents, originally from La Rochelle, France, had fled to Germany from religious persecution after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes. They came to America in 1724, first settling in New Rochelle, NY, and subsequently moved to Oley, Pennsylvania in 1726. Her mother was of the noble French family of de Harcourt.

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www.uua.org and links from the website of the Unitarian Universalist Association

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Some passages from Howe and Bell were borrowed without quotation marks.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

PREFACE AND APOLOGIAS	2
RELIGION.....	3
UNIVERSALISM AND UNITARIANISM: THE BASICS	4
EARLY HISTORY OF UNIVERSALIST IDEOLOGY.....	4
UNIVERSALISTS ORGANIZE AS A DENOMINATION.....	5
EVOLUTION OF UNIVERSALIST IDEOLOGY IN AMERICA	7
SOCIAL ACTIVISM	11
UNITARIAN-UNIVERSALIST MERGER.....	12
1960 PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE AT THE MERGER	15
PRINCIPLES ADOPTED IN 1965	15
FAMILY	16
DE BENNEVILLE: FAMILY BACKGROUND, ENGLAND	17
CONVERSION TO UNIVERSALISM.....	17
THE FRENCH YEARS (1720 – 1723).....	18
THE YEARS IN GERMANY (c 1723 – 1793).....	19
LIFE IN AMERICA (1741 – 1793).....	21
SELECTIONS FROM THE WRITINGS OF DR GEORGE DE BENNEVILLE	24
DEFINITIONS, INTERESTING FACTOIDS AND TRIVIA	26
SOURCES.....	29