An 18th Century Near-Death Experience: The Case of George de Benneville

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ABSTRACT: Near-death experiences (NDEs) have been reported since ancient times. Before the advent of modern reporting methods in medicine and the social sciences, the credibility of these accounts was often compromised through editing by church authorities or retelling by secondary sources. The autobiographical account of the NDE of George de Benneville, an 18th-century physician and lay minister, would satisfy the criteria of contemporary near-death researchers. In addition, de Benneville's life is so well-documented that researchers have confidence in his personal credibility. The hopeful Universalist message in his account is also consistent with the reports of modern-day NDEs. We provide a complete account of de Benneville's NDE and compare it with both ancient and modern NDEs. We discuss his experiences within the context of comparative religion in general and Universalist Christian theology in particular.

KEY WORDS: near-death experience; Universalist Christianity; religious experiences; afterlife; transpersonal.

Near-death experiences were rarely recorded prior to modern resuscitation techniques, but there is no doubt they have occurred since the dawn of humanity. In his Republic, the ancient Greek philosopher and educator Plato told the story of Er, a man who revived on his funeral pyre and recounted his near-death experience (NDE)
Plato (1892/4th century B.C.). In the 1st century, Plutarch recounted the story of Thespesius of Soli who died of a blow to the head but revived during his funeral three days later (Plutarch, 1918/1st century). In the 6th century, St. Gregory the Great told the story of a man named Stephen who died but came back to life before his body could be embalmed (Gregory the Great, 1959/6th century). The 8th-century English theologian and scholar the Venerable Bede described the near-death experience of a man named Cunningham or Drythelm who “rose from the dead” in 696 A.D. (Bede, 1907/8th century). In his Ecclesiastical History, Bede also included two deathbed visions with similar themes. All these accounts stressed the necessity of living a righteous life in order to avoid punishment in the afterlife. Plato did not indicate Er’s reputation, but Plutarch stated that Thespesius had fallen into living a less-than-sterling life, Gregory wrote that Stephen’s character was mixed, and Bede noted that Cunningham became more religious and entered a monastery after his NDE.

Despite our fascination with these and other examples from ancient and medieval literature and the fact that they sound similar to modern NDE accounts, they are of little use to the modern near-death researcher. One of the most essential criteria for modern near-death research is that the account be an autobiographical or “first-hand” telling of the experience. In her analysis of medieval and modern accounts of otherworld journeys, Carol Zaleski noted, “we cannot simply peel away the literary wrapper and put our hand on an unembellished event. Even when a vision actually did occur, it is likely to have been re-worked many times before being recorded” (Zaleski, 1987, pp. 86–88). She suggested, for example, that the Church would have been eager to insure that these accounts did not contradict “truth” as defined by Church doctrine.

Before the advent of modern medicine and social sciences, there was little value placed on reporting events objectively. This was true for most mystical religious experience in general and near-death experiences in particular. Not until the end of the 19th century was organized research into these fields initiated by the British Society for Psychical Research and, subsequently, its American counterpart.

Against this suspicious background of NDEs interpreted through historians and theologians, we are fortunate to have one 18th-century NDE account that would meet the standards of modern researchers. In 1741, George de Benneville wrote his first-person NDE account. By examining his life and reputation, we hope to show that his NDE can be accepted as authentic and credible.
George de Benneville (1703–1793) was a physician and lay minister in Europe and an advocate of the doctrine of Universal Salvation that, in the end of time, all creatures will be restored to what he called "happiness and holiness." He brought the spirit of German Pietist communities to the new world, principally in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, but he made frequent journeys to the Southern states.

The youngest of nine children born to Huguenot refugees, de Benneville was born and brought up in the British royal court in London, his father being a nobleman from Normandy. His godmother was Queen Anne. After growing up in England, he traveled to France and eventually settled in Germany, where he had his near-death experience at the age of 36, and from whence he emigrated to America in the second quarter of the 18th century, arriving in Philadelphia, but eventually settling and marryin in what is now Berks County, Pennsylvania. He built there a large house that contained a schoolroom for both immigrants and Native American children, a large room used by many religious groups, and a space for his medical practice. He learned and used many herbal remedies from tribes in the area, some of whom often would camp outside his house. He also assisted in the first German language edition of the Bible published in the United States, and put the Bible passages that justified Universal Salvation in red type.

De Benneville believed that there was an essential unity behind every appearance of religious diversity. Thus he was able to incorporate into his medical practice Native American remedies and even some of their symbols and language. In 1757 he and his family moved near Philadelphia, where he continued his medical practice while opening an apothecary shop. He treated the wounded of both sides at the Battle of Germantown in 1777 and even permitted British troops to be buried in his family plot. He died of a stroke in 1793 (De Benneville, 1804; Morgan, 1995, pp 28–33).

The Near-Death Experience of George de Benneville

This is de Benneville’s NDE in his own words. The spelling and punctuation are left in their original form.

I felt myself die by degrees, and exactly at midnight I was separated from my body, and saw the people occupied in washing it, according to
the custom of the country. I had a great desire to be freed from the sight of my body, and immediately I was drawn up as in a cloud, and beheld great wonders where I passed, impossible to be written or expressed. I quickly came to a place which appeared to my eyes as a level plain, so extensive that my sight was not able to reach its limits, filled with all sorts of delightful fruit trees, agreeable to behold, and which sent forth such fragrant odours that all the air was filled as with incense. In this place I found that I had two guardians, one at my right hand and the other at my left, exceeding beautiful beyond expression, whose boundless friendship and love seemed to penetrate through all my inward parts. ... They had wings and resembled angels, having shining bodies and white garments.

He that was at my right hand came before me, and said, "My dear soul and my dear brother, take courage, the most holy trinity hath favored you to be comforted with an everlasting and universal consolation, by discovering to you how, and in what manner, he will restore all his creatures without exception, to the praise of his glory, and their eternal salvation; and you shall be witness of this, and shall rejoice in singing and triumph with all the children of God, therefore as a reward for the friendship and love that you have born for your neighbours, on whose accounts you had many extreme griefs, and shed many tears, which God himself, who shall turn all your griefs to exceeding great gladness." Then he took his place at my right hand. After that the second guardian who was at my left hand appeared before me, and spoke thus; "My dear soul, my dear brother, be of good cheer, thou shalt be strengthened and comforted after your griefs with an universal and eternal consolation. ... You must be prepared to pass through the seven habitations of the damned; be of good courage and prepare yourself to feel something of their sufferings, but be turned inward deeply during the time, and you shall thereby be preserved." Then he took his place at my left hand; immediately we were lifted up in the air, and sometimes after we arrived in a dark obscure place, where nothing but weeping, lamentation, and gnashing of teeth, could be understood. A dreadful place, as being the repository of all sorts of damned souls, under condemnation with the torments, pains, grieves and sufferings which their sins had merited, for each one had his works to follow him in death. All iniquities and sins were reduced to seven classes or habitations: there was an eternal confusion there, that which one made, the other destroyed.

The duellist, in his fire of anger, burns against his enemy, and they pass as a flame and firebrand of hell, one through the other. You might see fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, thieves, the covetous, drunkards, slanderers, ravishers, etc., each laboring and being employed with his sins and iniquities. One might also see all kind of conditions of men, divines, deputies, controvertors, advocates, judges, lawyers, and in a word one might discover whatsoever any of them had done upon earth. In each habitation I discovered that those who were abased and that appeared sorrowful for their sins, were
separated from the others of seven habitations of the damned, where I knew one I had been acquainted with upon earth. I discovered also that he had an habitation among the damned, and that they were able to see the elect from that habitation where he was, but were not able to pass through because there was a great gulph between them, so that all are obliged to dwell where they are.

It is impossible to describe my condition, as I had great compassion towards the sufferers, inasmuch as I had part of their sufferings.

After we had passed through we were lifted up some distance from the place, where we reposed ourselves; and a messenger was sent to us, who watered or refreshed us as with a river of pleasure, saying, eat, my beloved, and drink, my friends, to refresh yourselves after all your toils and pains; my dear soul, and my dear brother, (addressing himself to me) the most holy trinity always works wonders in all times within his poor creatures without exception, and he will order for a time, and half a time, that you shall return into your earthly tabernacle, to publish and to proclaim to the people of the world an universal gospel, that shall restore in its time all the human species without exception to its honor and to the glory of its most holy trinity. .... Hallelujah.

Beholding the messenger attentively, I discovered that he had a most glorious body, dressed in a robe whiter than snow, filled with the most exalted love and friendship, joined with the deepest humility which penetrated me through and through, and suddenly there was heard a great multitude of the heavenly host, and the messenger said, as he flew to join the same, with a sweet voice—"Holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and who is to come."

The multitude were innumerable, and there was one who surpassed in grandeur, brightness, beauty, majesty, magnificence and excellence, all the others; even the son of the living God, being the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the majesty on high.

As the multitude approached the glory caused us to fall down, and to adore in spirit and in truth the son of the living God, who marched in the midst of the multitude.

After they had passed us, we were lifted up, and caused to follow them, for the air carried us the way they went, in a different manner than before. Oh! the wonders of our God! When we arrived in the place of the seven habitations of the damned, we could perceive no more darkness, obscurity, pain, torments, lamentations, afflictions, nor gnashing of teeth. All were still and quiet, and an agreeable sweetness appeared through the whole. Then all the heavenly host shouted with one voice and said, "An eternal and everlasting deliverance, an eternal and everlasting restoration, universal and everlasting restitution of all things." Then all the multitude adored the most holy trinity, and sang the song of the Lamb, even the song of the triumph for the victory gained by him, in the most harmonious
manner. And at the end, all the multitude being upon their knees, said with a loud voice, "Great and marvelous are thy works, O Lord, God Almighty, just and true are thy ways. Oh! King of Saints." Presently they passed through the seven habitations of the damned and a multitude were delivered from each, and being clothed in white robes, they followed the heavenly host, praising and glorifying the most high for their deliverance; one might know them amongst the others: they all retired by a different way than that which they came. The messenger then came and conducted us into a most wonderful place, and ordered my two guardians to conduct me into five celestial mansions, where the Lord's elect abide; and then to reconduct me to dwell yet a time, and half a time in my earthly habitation, and to preach to the lower world the universal everlasting gospel; and that the most holy trinity hath a pure universal love towards all the human race, without exception, and to each one in particular; then turning himself towards me he said, my dear soul, my dear brother, thou shalt be favored of the most holy trinity, to be conducted by thy guardians, who shall never leave thee; when thou shall have need of their counsel, thou needest but to call them, and they shall be day and night present at thy service; they shall conduct thee into five of the heavenly mansions at this time, where thou shalt partake in a certain degree, of the celestial glory as much as thy spirit shall be able to receive, as not being yet sanctified and purified sufficiently, and then thou shalt be reconducted into thine earthly tabernacle, for a time and half a time and shall preach to the lower world the universal everlasting gospel, and that the most holy trinity hath a pure universal love towards all the human race, without exception, and towards each one in particular.

The fountain of grace bless and preserve thee, and cause his face to shine upon and in thee, and enlighten thine understanding both in time and in eternity, Amen. Our knees bending of their own accord, he laid his hand upon my head, and blessed me, and immediately took wing and swiftly fled away.

After that, my guardian conducted me into five celestial habitations, where I discovered many wonders. Some had greater brightness, glory, and majesty than others, and, as the places were, so were the inhabitants; some were clothed in garments whiter then snow; others had transparent bodies, and others again had white bodies resembling crystal. It is impossible to express these things. They were moved by boundless burning love, rising up and then plunging themselves into the deepest humility; all their motions were penetrating, being filled with love and friendship. ... Their actions and manners are strengthened and animated with brightness, being filled with light as with the rays of the sun; it was the fire of heavenly love, which by inflaming all their hearts, causes them all to burn in the same spirit. They have no need of any way of speaking there, but the language and motions of eternal and universal love without words for their actions, their motions speak more than all words. I was then
conducted into five habitations of the elect. At the first, a great multitude came before us with songs to the honor and glory of the most high, and of the victory gained over the damned. They received us with triumph, great zeal, love and friendship, saluting us with profound humility, and conducting us into a large room; there was a great table covered and furnished with all sorts of fruit, not only pleasant to behold, but also exceedingly delicious to the taste.

In the mean time while we were taking our repast, the celestial multitudes formed songs, and sang psalms of praise and thanksgiving to the most holy trinity. After that we were conducted into all the five celestial habitations (that I was to see) where I saw many wonders, impossible to describe. First, many thrones lifted up of inexpressible beauty and magnificence; upon one of these thrones I beheld the royal high priest, surrounded with exceeding great brightness, and clothed in most excellent majesty, being employed in kind intercession before his father, for all the human species, pleading the sufficiency of his blood-shedding to deliver and sanctify a thousand such worlds as ours. All the elect, with the heavenly spirits, joined their intercession with that of their high priest, the only chief king, being reconcilers, saviors, and restorers in the same spirit. This mutual intercession appeared like incense ascending on high into the sanctuary of the Lord. Over against the throne I discovered Adam with Eve, rejoicing in the only mediator between God and men, and adoring together the most holy trinity for the deliverance of their children out of the great miseries and eternal condemnation into which their sin and fall had brought them, and upon their bended knees adoring the only mediator for the intercession he makes in behalf of mankind. Also I beheld a multitude of spirits flying and enflamed with the fire of heavenly love, while we adored, humbled in nothingness, rendering our religious homage to the most high for his intercession and the deliverance of all mankind. Then my guardian, who was at my right hand, coming before me, said thus, "Dear soul, my dear brother, do you see these spirits flying, who are vanished in the spirit of love and gratitude, humbled and self-annihilated as it were, adoring before the throne of grace, and praying the saviour for the intercessions he made for them. These are lately delivered from the infernal prisons; it is from them that the tincture of the blood of Jesus Christ hath been shed even to the last drop, notwithstanding they had dwelt a long time shut up in the place of the damned, under the power of the second death, and have passed thro' many agonies, pains and tribulations. ..." Upon that, I perceived that Adam and Eve approached, and Adam spoke to me after his manner. ... "My dear brother, rejoice with universal and eternal joy, as you are favored with the heavenly visions! it is in this manner that our adorable royal high priest, mediator, and intercessor, shall restore all my descendants to the glory of our God, and their eternal and universal salvation for the kingdom of eternal love hath power sufficient to draw all mankind out of their bondage, and to exclalm and say; O
death, where is thy sting, etc. But my dear brother, this love of our God in Jesus Christ, by the power of his holy spirit, shall not only gain the victory over all the human species, but also surmount or overflow the kingdom of Satan entirely, with all the principalities of the fallen angels, and shall bring them back in their first glory, which they have had in the beginning. I will make all things new, said the Lord of hosts, and the end shall return into its beginning. O my Lord and my God, what great wonders hast thou caused to pass before mine eyes! Who am I, O my God, dust and ashes, an ungrateful and rebellious creature, I should not dare to lift mine eyes towards the heavens if the blood of Jesus Christ thy son did not plead for me. My soul rejoices and is glad, she shouts for joy; O my God, whom I adore, love, and respect; before whom I desire to be without ceasing, self-annihilated at thy feet. O my God and my love, the seraphims and cherubims burning with the fire of thy heavenly love, adore and honor thee; give me thy grace also, O my God, that I may be consumed before thee, while I sing the majesty, glory, and the memory of God, who hath created and redeemed me. I would praise him incessantly, not in shadow or figure, but in reality and truth. I would continue devoted to thee, and always be swallowed up in the ocean of love without a wish to leave it."

Being in this manner conducted into five celestial habitations, I discovered many mysteries, saw many miracles, and beheld the wonders of the most holy trinity among the children, the elect, and heavenly inhabitants, and perceiving how some surpassed others in brightness, light, splendor, majesty, friendship, love, humiliation, and self-abasement, concerning of which things my tongue is too feeble to speak, and my pen to write. I adore the marvelous ways of my God, with all the happy spirits.

Many thrones, palaces, edifices, temples, and buildings were erected in all parts, with fruit trees intermixed, rivers of pleasure gliding along through the celestial land, which appeared like a garden of heaven, even the paradise of God. It is the court of the King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, which the eye has not seen nor the ear heard, and which the hearts of men have not received. It is the celestial globe where the New Jerusalem, or Mount Sion, is placed, where the bosom of Abraham is; where the sufferers who came out of their tribulations are refreshed, and rejoice forgetting all their miseries; being come out of their purifications, they are made to rejoice in Sion; O magnificent globe! O thou city of the Great God! stately city of this place! where shall a mortal find convenient phrases to lift out a little of thy glory and splendor? It is the glory and magnificence of the most holy trinity, where God is pleased to manifest himself in his pomp and beauty. The blessed angels have their employment in serving God; they compose the court of the Great King. O my God, I am not able to express that which penetrates me, of the grandeur, magnificence, splendor, pomp and majesty of thy dwellings, or of the inhabitants in those transparent places, hallelujah and victory for ever. ... AMEN.
Then my guardian took me up, and reconducted me to the house from whence I came, where I perceived the people assembled, and discovering my body in the coffin, I was reunited with the same, and found myself lodged within my earthly tabernacle, and coming to myself, I knew my dear brother Marsey, and many others, who gave me an account of my being twenty-five hours in the coffin, and seventeen hours before they put me in the coffin, which altogether made forty-two hours; to me they seemed as many years; beginning then to preach the universal gospel, I was presently put in prison, but soon set at liberty again. I visited all my brethren, preaching the gospel and taking leave of them all, because that my God and Sovereign Good called me to go to America and preach the gospel there. I took my departure for the same in the 38th year of my age, and it is forty-one years since I first arrived here. The 28th of July next, 1782, I shall be 79 years of age. Blessed be the name of the Lord forever.

The Visions of George de Benneville

The NDE is considered to be one category of mystical experience with an easily identifiable "trigger," that of dying briefly. Other mystical experiences include visionary experiences, out-of-body experiences, deathbed visions, and after-death communications. Modern studies have shown that about 40 percent of the populations of developed countries have had mystical experiences (Hay, 1987; Wood, 1989). There is some evidence that the number increases to as high as 65 percent when subjects are interviewed personally rather than being queried by written questionnaire (Hardy, 1979).

A legitimate question often asked is how we know these people are not simply delusional. Social scientists have now accumulated enough data to state that 5 percent of the population experiences psychosis in their lifetime (Wood and Wood, 1999). In comparing the relatively small percentage of psychotic persons to the number reporting mystical experience, the mystics clearly predominate. While visionary experience is more commonly identified with mental illness than nonvisionary mystical experience, research in the 19th century, as well as research in the 20th century using random samples, showed the majority of persons experiencing hallucinations were not psychotic (Bentall, 2000; West 1995). In reviewing de Benneville's personal history carefully, there is no evidence that his visions were the result of psychosis.
In addition to his NDE, de Benneville had visionary experiences. His first vision occurred as a teenager while he was changing his shirt at a ball. In his words, he “fell into a fainting fit and had a vision of myself burning as a firebrand in hell” (1804, p. 7). After an interval of 15 months, he had a vision of Jesus revealing to him that his sins were forgiven and that all people would receive salvation. When he began to talk about this vision to others, his story was brought to the attention of French Calvinist ministers who were in exile with him. He said, “They held to predestination, and I held to the restoration of all souls” (1804, p. 12). He was cast out of the Calvinist church, his own personal religious experience having trumped church authority. As we still find today, persons whose mystical religious experience is accepted by their church community tend to remain within it, while those whose congregations condemn them exit rather than deny the truth of their own experience.

De Benneville’s next religious experience was at age 17 years when he heard an internal voice “calling me to go to France to preach the Gospel” (1804, p. 13). His fourth experience, which occurred during the time he was preaching on the European continent, was a vision of heaven where people were worshiping God. He reported falling ill in his late 30s and suffering a high fever from “a consumptive disorder” (1804, p. 18). He again had visions of a fine plain filled with fruit trees and inhabitants who were “clothed in garments white as snow” (1804, p. 19). This is the only one of his visionary accounts considered to be compromised because of the presence of fever. He subsequently died and had a NDE, as related above.

**Judgment or Life Review in World Religions**

De Benneville’s NDE is similar to many pre-modern NDEs in which the person died but revived near the time of burial. The theological idea that humans face Judgment of Deeds, often called a life review in NDE accounts, dates to ancient Egypt. It appeared in the instruction for Merikare more than 4,100 years ago (Assmann, 2005). Coexisting with this Judgment were the Pyramid Texts and Book of the Dead, which provided the deceased with magical instruction to insure a positive outcome (Spence, 1990/1915). We do not claim that these Egyptian texts were based on NDEs or mystical religious experiences; they were simply Egyptian theology with a familiar “ring.” In Zoroastrianism, judgment is determined by weighing good deeds
against bad deeds. Those who do not measure up are purified in Hell until they “shape up” (Vincent, 1999, pp. 46-47), after which all are saved.

In both Plato’s and Plutarch’s accounts, the NDErs witnessed Judgment, Heaven, and Hell; after a period of time, the deceased were reincarnated (Plato, 1892/4th century B.C.; Plutarch, 1918/1st century). These Greco-Roman accounts echoed the theology of the Eastern religions – Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and Jain (Bhattacharji, 1987; Evans-Wentz, 1957; Merh, 1996; Nigosian, 2000; Vincent, 2005). In the Hindu religion and its derivatives, there is Judgment, followed by an intermediate state of Heaven or Hell that is not permanent; reincarnation follows for all except the few who are pure. Reincarnation has only begun to be studied objectively, but Ian Stevenson and Jim Tucker at the University of Virginia Medical School and their colleagues have gathered 2,500 contemporary cases suggestive of reincarnation (Tucker, 2005).

In the Christian account of Gregory the Great, a man named Stephen was taken before the heavenly judge and had his case dismissed because of “mistaken identity.” Curiously, his neighbor died during the same hour, also with the name of Stephen (Gregory the Great, 1959/6th century). This kind of error is commonly reported in Hindu NDEs (Pasricha and Stevenson, 1986). While he was dead, Stephen found himself on a bridge with Heaven on one side and Hell below the bridge. He observed that the unjust would slip off the bridge and fall into Hell (Gregory the Great, 1959/6th century). This kind of “bridge” imagery is also present in Zoroastrianism and Shiite Islam (Moulton, 1980). In Bede’s account, the Christian NDER was shown Heaven, Hell, and purgatory (Bede, 1997). As mentioned before, the Medieval Church often edited accounts to conform to official dogma. Gregory the Great admitted as much when he wrote, “God allows some souls to return to their bodies shortly after death, so that the sight of hell may at last teach them to fear eternal punishments in which words alone could not make them believe” (Gregory the Great, 1959/6th century, p 237).

**From Judgment to Universal Salvation**

In de Benneville’s NDE, we have a first-hand account from a reliable individual. In it, he asserted the primary tenet of Universalism, that after purification in Hell, all will be saved. De Benneville’s NDE
reinforced his earlier vision that caused his abrupt change in theology from Calvinist predestination to Christian Universalism. De Benneville's NDE conformed to modern NDEs in two important aspects: NDEs are largely positive in nature, and those who initially find themselves in Hell can reverse their fortune by calling out to God (Vincent, 2003). In fact, de Benneville's account was compatible with the contemporary account of George Ritchie (1998) who recounted that in the hellish regions of his NDE, angels were trying to help those in Hell. In his vision, Ritchie was told by Jesus, “You are right, for I, Love, be lifted up, I shall draw all men [people] unto Me” (p. 44). This is virtually identical wording to the great Universalist Biblical passage of John 12:32: “and I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (NRSV).

The first person to speak of Universal Salvation was not a Christian, but rather Zoroaster, the ancient Persian prophet of the Magi, who lived about 1200 B.C. (Vincent, 1999). Zoroaster said that God based salvation on good deeds in this life; Christian Universalism added Jesus's message of forgiveness (Matthew 6:12–15). Christian Universalism is supported by numerous verses in the Hebrew Bible and New Testament (Vincent, 2005). The earliest theological writing on Christian Universalism was that of St. Clement of Alexandria in the 2nd century. His pupil, Origen, was Universalism’s most influential theorist (Vincent, 2005).

In the 7th century, Universalism was dealt a blow when Origen’s theology was condemned by the Roman Catholic Church, although it remained viable in the Churches of the East. In the West, Universalism was relegated to the realm of mystics until the Reformation (Hanson, 1899). Julian of Norwich was one of the best examples of this. Although her Universalist mystical experiences of God and Jesus were contrary to Roman Catholic doctrine, she wrote that both her experiences and Catholic teaching must be true in some sense, a “dance” that enabled her to keep in the good graces of the Catholic Church (Hick, 1999).

In the Church of the East, Universalism continued, and parts of the Universalist teachings of Theodore of Mopsuestia are still in the liturgy of the Nestorian Church today (Hanson, 1999). Christian Universalism was also found in the Chapter 60 of the Book of the Bee, written by the 13th-century bishop Solomon of Basra. With the Renaissance, there was a revival of Universalist Christianity in the West, and for a time in the 19th century, the Universalist Church of
America was the 6th largest denomination in the United States. It survives today in the now interfaith Unitarian Universalist Association, of which Universalist Christians (like the authors) are only a small remnant. In the 21st century, Christian Universalism is advocated by a wide variety of Christians from post-Vatican II Catholics to Primitive Baptists (Vincent, 2005, p 5).

**Discussion**

De Benneville's NDE was preceded by a mystical religious experience in the form of a vision that was Universalist in nature, a theological concept completely contrary to his religious upbringing. Departing from the Calvinist view of salvation for a few "elect," de Benneville spent the remainder of his life as a minister and physician witnessing for his understanding of a God too good to condemn anyone to Eternal Hell. His reversal was as dramatic a change as that of St. Paul (I Corinthians 15:3–8; Galatians 1:13–16) who went from persecuting Christians to being one of Christianity's major evangelists.

In recent years, there has been much documentation that both mystical religious experiences and NDEs change the lives of those who have them in positive and lasting ways (Greyson, 2000; Hay, 1987). In de Benneville's autobiography, we have a credible person's account of his mystical experiences and NDE. His life reflected his belief in God's Universal, unconditional love for all.

**References**


