

ARE THESE HEATHENS?

Dr. George De Benneville (1703-1793) was came from a French Huguenot family taking refuge from persecution in England in the 17th century, which made him a natural religious liberal, open to new religious insight. Yet he lived at a time when prejudice against others who were different was common, a prejudice which the young De Benneville shared. His family had the favor of king William and had money, and so also shared the arrogance of the privileged classes.

“When [I] arrived at the age of twelve years,” he wrote, “I was very wild [and] believed myself to be of a different mass from mankind in general, and by this fond imagination I was self-exalted, and believed myself to be more than other men. But God soon convinced me to the contrary.” He first gravitated to Universalism (that God loves all people equally and not just the “right” people) as a result of the following incident. Let De Benneville tell it in his own words, translated from his native French.

“As it was designed that I should learn navigation, I was sent to sea in a vessel of war belonging to a little fleet bound to the coast of Barbary with presents, and to renew the peace with Algiers, Tunis, and Tripolis. Being arrived at Algiers, as I walked upon deck I saw some Moors who brought some refreshments to sell. One of them slipped down and tore a piece out of one of his legs. Two of his companions, having ain him on the deck, each of them kissed the wound, shedding tears upon it, then turned towards the rising of the sun, they cried in such a manner that I was much moved with anger at their making such a noise and ordered my waiter to bring them before me.

“Upon demanding the reason for their noise, they perceived that I was angry, asked my pardon, and told me the cause was owing to one of their brothers having hurt his leg by a fall and that they kissed the wound in order to sympathize with him; and as the tears were saltish, they were a good remedy to heal the same; and the reason of their turning towards the sun’s rising was to invoke him who created the sun to have compassion upon their poor brother, and prayed he would please to heal him.

“Upon that I was so convinced, and moved within, that I thought my heart would break, and that my life was about to leave me. My eyes were filled with tears, and I felt such an internal condemnation, that I was obliged to cry out and say, ‘Are these Heathens? No; I confess before God they are Christians, and I myself am a Heathen!’

“Behold the first conviction that the grace of our Sovereign Good employed: he was pleased to convince a white person by blacks! One who carried the name of a Christian by a pagan, and who was obliged to confess himself but a heathen.” De Benneville was barely a teenager, and had to be reminded by several further incidents of the prejudices yet in his heart. Yet insights from the incidents of his life allowed the fear within to be dispelled, and to find hope in a God who loved every human being fully and equally, including this wayward youth.

Ref: “The Life and Trance of Doctor George De Benneville,” *The Annual Journal of the Universalist Historical Society*, vol. 2 (1960-61), pp. 74-75