

RELIGION IN THE RUSSELL FAMILY

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Bertrand Russell grew up with people who in most cases took their religion seriously and in some cases saw it as the most important aspect of their lives. Not much has been written about the importance of religion in the Russell family although good public sources have been available for a long time. This article is mainly an attempt to describe the religious views of Lord and Lady John Russell, Russell's father, and his brother Frank. Russell's own views on religion will not be the focal point of discussion.

We know quite a lot about the religious beliefs and habits of the Victorians. Both Lord and Lady Russell were affected by the Evangelical spirit that swept through the Church of England, but although pious and solemn they were both liberal and undogmatic. We also know about how many honest doubters reacted to the beliefs and habits of their parents. The new theories in science and a new critical interpretation of the Bible were difficult to reconcile with orthodox beliefs concerning the creation, revelations, miracles, etc. Many were forced to make up their minds, and there were many who gave witness to their crisis of faith. Bertrand Russell's father and brother are two good examples of honest doubters.

Bertrand Russell was a descendent of the English Whig aristocracy on his mother's side as well on his father's. His maternal grandfather was the second Lord Stanley of Alderley. He was a Liberal politician who held minor offices in several governments. He died before Russell was born. His wife was Henrietta Maria, daughter of Viscount Dillon. Together they had four sons and five daughters. Lady Stanley lived until 1895 and Russell occasionally visited her when he was a boy. In

an article from 1943 called "My Grandmother and Mr. Gladstone", subtitled "They Were the Most Frightening People I've Ever Known", he says that "My childhood and early youth were dominated by my two grandmothers, Lady Russell and Lady Stanley."¹ This is true as far as Lady Russell goes, but Lady Stanley's influence on him cannot without exaggeration be compared to that of his paternal grandmother. Nevertheless she was an important person in Russell's early life, not least because her personality; her ideas were quite different compared to Lady Russell's. Russell writes about Lady Stanley in his *Autobiography* and in *The Amberley Papers*. He describes her as "an eighteenth century type, rationalistic and unimaginative, keen on enlightenment, and contemptuous of Victorian goody-goody priggery" (*Auto.* 1: 33). She was interested in popular science and read Huxley and Tyndall until old age.² Her main public activity was related to women's education. She was one of the founders of Girton College with which she was concerned from its beginning until her death.³

The reason why Russell feared Lady Stanley was that "she had a caustic tongue, and spared neither age nor sex. I was always consumed with shyness while in her presence, and as none of the Stanleys were shy, this irritated her" (*Auto.* 1: 32). Although Russell felt inhibited by Lady Stanley, he enjoyed the Sunday luncheons at her house where he met his aunts and uncles. They were a very different crowd compared to the Russell family. They were encouraged to debate openly the political and religious issues of the day, and in this way Russell was exposed to an intellectual openness that was different from the one at Pembroke Lodge. Russell writes, "At the Sunday luncheons there would be vehement arguments, for among the daughters and sons-in-law there were representatives of the Church of England, Unitarianism, and Positivism, to be added to the religions represented by the sons" (*Auto.* 1: 34). One of her sons was a Mohammedan, another a freethinker, and one was a Roman Catholic priest (*ibid.*). To have been exposed to such a variety of creeds probably stimulated Russell to question the religious ideas that Lady Russell tried to implant in him.

¹ *Vogue*, 15 July 1943, p. 35.

² "My Grandmother and Mr. Gladstone", p. 35.

³ Bertrand and Patricia Russell, *The Amberley Papers* (London: Hogarth P.; New York: Norton, 1937), 1: 17. Hereafter abbreviated "AP".

But before I describe her, I shall say something about her husband.

Russell's paternal grandfather was Lord John Russell, the third son of the sixth Duke of Bedford.⁴ He was born in 1792 and died in 1878. He was Prime Minister of Great Britain between 1846 and 1852 and for a shorter time in 1865–66. He entered Parliament in 1813 and was from the beginning a proponent of liberty and toleration both in political and religious matters. He promoted the abolition of the Test and Corporation Acts in 1828 and is best known for his work on the passing of the first Reform Bill in 1832. The Russells were known as supporters of religious toleration and of political reform, and although Lord John Russell died too early to have had much of a direct influence on his grandson, there was, according to Bertrand Russell, "a very strong family tradition, which, in various ways, influenced my grandfather, my father, and me" (*AP* 1: 29). However, when it came to religion, his son and grandson did not exactly follow in his footsteps.

Owen Chadwick says that "after Gladstone [Lord John] was the most fervent and religious prime minister of the Victorian age."⁵ He was not an evangelical like Wilberforce; instead, he belonged to the tradition of the latitudinarians. Chadwick writes: "Believing that religion must be of the state and that Christianity is the source of enlightened legislation, he argued the necessity of an established church, and was abused as bitterly by radical nonconformists as by Tory churchman" (p. 232). He stood for an undogmatic interpretation of Christianity and a strong dislike for Catholicism. "Though he worshipped regularly in parish churches, he disliked parts of the prayer book, finding its liturgical repetition to be tedious and its formality to be formalism. He was unceremonious and discovered nothing intelligible in a sacramental cast of mind" (p. 233).

These observations are supported by what he himself saw as the most important elements of Christianity. In a letter to Lady Russell the same year as he became Prime Minister for the first time, he says:

⁴ For a short description of Lord John Russell, see C. Trent, *The Russells* (London: Frederick Muller, 1966), pp. 226–57. For a study in depth, see J. Prest, *Lord John Russell* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

⁵ O. Chadwick, *The Victorian Church*, Part I (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 233.

I do not see how it is possible to be out of the Roman Catholic pale, and not use one's own faculties on the interpretation of the Bible. That tells us that our Saviour said, he who knew that to love God with all our soul and to love our neighbour as ourself were the two great commandments, was not far from the kingdom of God. This surely can be known and even followed without a priest at all.⁶

In *Recollections and Suggestions* he writes: "I am almost afraid to avow that I prefer the simple words of Christ to any dogmatic interpretation of them ... I think that the spirit of the Christian religion is to be found, not in dogma, but in reverence to God, and love of our neighbour."⁷ The emphasis on tolerance and brotherly love as the most important aspects of Christianity is also to be found in his *Essays on the Rise and Progress of the Christian Religion in the West of Europe*.⁸ Although his son and grandson gave up the belief in the existence of the Christian God, they both agreed with him that the preaching of brotherly love is the most important aspect of Christianity.

For reasons that will be explained later, Russell's paternal grandmother became the most important person in Russell's early life. It was she who more than anyone else supplied him with the moral and religious beliefs from which he in his adolescence and later tried to emancipate himself. For these reasons I shall give a more extended description of her development and her moral and religious beliefs. My main source is *Lady John Russell: a Memoir with Selections from Her Diaries and Correspondence*. It was written and edited by Desmond MacCarthy and her devoted daughter Agatha (see note 6).

Compared to her husband, who thought that religion was an important issue on which everyone should think seriously and make up their minds according to their own judgment, Lady John Russell saw religion as the most important topic in any person's life; and she was particularly anxious that her children and grandchildren should embrace the right faith, which would ensure them a place in heaven. Her sincere concern for religion was something she brought with her

⁶ *Lady John Russell: a Memoir with Selections from Her Diaries and Correspondence*, ed. D. MacCarthy and A. Russell (New York: John Lane, 1911), p. 83.

⁷ *Recollections and Suggestions 1813-1873* (London: Longmans, Green, 1875), p. 171.

⁸ London: Longmans, Green, 1873.

from her own upbringing, and she tried to pass it on to everyone who came within her sphere of influence.

Lady Russell's maiden name was Frances Anna Maria Elliot. She was born the second daughter of the Earl of Minto, who was an ambassador and whose father was Governor General of India. Her Scotch Presbyterian border family took their religion seriously, but like many other Presbyterians she later became a Unitarian.⁹ She was born in November 1815 and died in January 1898. She was thus twenty-two years younger than her husband, and she lived on for twenty years after his decease.

Her biographers say that "from her childhood she was deeply religious" (*Lady John Russell*, p. 8). The meaning of "deeply religious" can be queried, but her diaries and letters contain many prayers and reflections on religious matters. In all, two emotions predominate: "a trust in God and an earnest conviction that a life of love—love to God and man—is the heart of religion. Her religion was contemplative as well as practical; but it was a religion of the conscience rather than one of mystical emotions" (p. 9). In her diary from 1836 (p. 24), she writes:

What is it I wish for? O God, Thou alone canst clearly know—and in Thy hands alone is the remedy. Oh let this longing cease! Turn it, O Father, to a worthy object! Unworthy it must now be, for were it after virtue, pure holy virtue, could I not still it? Dispel the mist that dims my eyes, that I may first plainly read the secrets of my wretched heart, and then give me, O Almighty God, the sincere will to root out all therein that beareth not good fruit.

Her diaries and letters are full of her struggles regarding moral self-improvement and her reflections on religious beliefs. From an early time she shows a leaning towards an undogmatic understanding of religion. In an 1842 letter to her sister Lady Mary Abercromby she writes:

I have just been reading the Thirty-nine articles for the first time in my life, and am therefore particularly disposed to all that is simple in matters of religion. They *may* be true; but whether they are so or not, is what neither I, nor those who wrote them, nor the wisest man that lives, can judge; that they

⁹ For information about the Presbyterians' move towards Unitarianism, see H. L. Short's essay, "Presbyterians under a New Name", in *The English Presbyterians* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1968), pp. 219-86.

are presumptuous in the extreme, all who read may see. In short, I hate theology as the greatest enemy of true religion, and may therefore leave the subject to my betters. (P. 66)

That "true religion" was not only to be found among Christians is a conviction she often comes back to. In a letter written to the same sister six years later she says:

I believe that whatever is *meant* as an act of devotion to God, or as an acknowledgement of His greatness and glory, whether expressed by the simple prayer of a Covenanter on the hill-side or by the ceremonies of a Catholic priesthood, or even by the prostrations of a Mahometan, or by the self-torture of a Hindoo, may and ought to inspire us with respect and with a devout feeling, at least when the worshippers themselves are pious and sincere. (Pp. 112-13)

As her children grew older she had the opportunity to apply her own views on religious education to them. In a letter three years later to the same sister she writes:

I am daily more and more convinced of the folly, or worse than folly, the mischief, of stuffing children's heads with doctrines some of which we do not believe ourselves (though we may think we do), others which we do not understand, while their hearts remain untouched.... Old as Johnny is, he does not yet go to church. I see with pain, but cannot help seeing, that from the time a child begins to go to church, the truth and candour of its religion are apt to suffer.... Oh, how far we still are from the religion of Christ! (P. 113)

She did not quite seem to realize the inconsistency in holding that all religions are equally valid on the one hand, and personally preferring the words of the Bible and an undogmatic version of Christianity on the other. Her children and grandchildren, however, most likely noticed this. She was more liberal in theory than she was when it came down to the actual practice of her own beliefs. Not even all forms of Christianity were much tolerated by her. In common with her husband she had a strong dislike for Catholicism and the attempts by Newman and others to bring it back to English soil. Her biographers claim that she was "always anxious to encourage perfect freedom and independence of thought in her children", and MacCarthy and

Agatha Russell supply a letter from her to her daughter on her fifteenth birthday (1868) as evidence:

The voice of God may sometimes sound differently to you from what it sounds even to your father or to me; if so, never be afraid to say so—never close your mind against any but bad thoughts; for although we are all one in as far as we all partake of God's spirit, which is the breath of life, still the communion of each soul with Him is, and must be, for that soul alone. (P. 216)

The voice of God did not sound much different to her daughter, who embraced her religion, lived with her mother until she died and never married. Her philosophy of religious education did, however, not work out as well with her first-born son and youngest grandson, who, after they achieved independence of mind, never heard anything that they could clearly or permanently identify as the voice of God.

Her husband believed that the ties between the State and the Church of England were a good thing. As she grew older she started to have her doubts. In a letter in the same year to her sister, now Lady Dunfermline, she writes:

I have been going through the contrary change from you as regards Church and State. I thought I was strongly for the connection (at least of a Church with the State, certainly not *the* Church of England as it now is), but reflection on what the history of our State Churches has been, the speeches in St. James's Hall of the Bishops fostered by the State, and Arthur Stanley's pamphlet, which says the best that *can* be said for the connection, and yet seems to open my eyes to the fallacy of that best, and the conversations I hear, have opened my eyes to the bad principle at the very root of a State Church. If *all* who call themselves teachers of religion could be paid, it might be very well, best of all perhaps; but I'm afraid there are difficulties not to be got over, and the objections to the voluntary system diminish on reflection. (P. 217)

It was well known that she had her husband's ear in many questions, and the separation of Church from State was a possible liberal cause; but in this case Lord John Russell, who was not as radical as his wife, did not let himself be influenced by her. There is no doubt that she had an independent mind, and that she became more liberal as she grew older. She read the writings of Unitarians and Agnostics, but it was not until a few years after her husband's death that she started to

worship with the Unitarians. She could even sympathize with some of the Agnostics' views and was a personal friend of Herbert Spencer, but there were limits to her sympathies. After a visit from him in 1873 she notes in her diary:

Long deep, interesting conversation; all amounting to "we know nothing," he assuring me that the prospect of annihilation has no terrors for him; I feeling that without immortality life is "all a cheat," and without a Father in heaven, right and wrong, love, conscience, joy, sorrow, are words without a meaning and the Universe, if governed at all, is governed by a malignant spirit who gives us hopes, and aspirations never to be fulfilled, affections to be wasted, a thirst for knowledge never to be quenched. (P. 240)

Her thirst for knowledge was deep and genuine, but she did not let her critical mind carry her all the way to agnosticism. Perhaps she did not realize that her encouragement of independent thinking did not guarantee that her children and grandchildren might not carry their critical thinking one step beyond the point she wished to. She read the Atheists, the Agnostics and the Sceptics, but she found it difficult to take them seriously. As far as they were sincere, she pitied them and thought them "of all men most miserable". In a 1870 letter to her youngest son, Rollo, she writes:

That they are *not* right, but wofully wrong, I firmly believe, and happily many and many noble intellect and great heart, which have not shrunk from searching into the mysteries of life and death with all the powers and all the love of truth given them by God to be used, not to lie dormant or merely receive what other men teach, have risen from the search with a firmer faith than before in Christ and in the immortality which he brought to light. I believe that many of those who deem themselves sceptics or atheists retain, after all, enough of the divine element within them practically to refute their own words. (P. 231)

As we shall see later, the pious reasoning exemplified by this letter and the entry in her diary failed to make an impression on the mind of her eldest son and youngest grandson.

Until 1874 Lady John Russell had little reason to doubt the existence of a loving Father in heaven guiding and protecting her and her family. She had begotten three sons and one daughter. Her oldest son had two sons and one daughter. But in April of that year her sister

died. In May her second son, William, became mentally ill and lost the ability to live a normal life. But worse was to come. In the summer Lady Amberley, the wife of her oldest son, and their only daughter, six years old, died of diphtheria within a few days of each other. Her eldest son was left with two sons, but that was not enough for him to wish to live on much longer. He was not able to comfort himself with the hope of seeing them again, since he believed neither in God nor in immortality. His mother knew this and she too suffered. In a letter to him written in the spring of 1875 she writes:

You have indeed been sorely tried, my child, and you have not—would that I could give it to you—the one and only rock of refuge and consolation, of faith in the wisdom and mercy of a God of love. But I trust in Him for you, and I know that though clouds hide Him from your sight, He will care for you and not forsake you—and even here on earth I look forward to much peaceful happiness for you, in your children, in books, in nature, in duties zealously done, in the love and sympathy of many—"Mutter Treu ist ewig neu," and that you may find some rest to your aching heart in that Mutter Treue, which is always hovering round you, wherever you are, and to which every day seems to add fresh strength and renewed longing to give you comfort, is my daily, nightly hope and prayer.... Kiss my two precious little boys and keep us in their memory. Is Bertrand as full of fun and merriment as he used to be? Poor pets! they look to you for all the tenderness of father and mother combined in order to be as happy as children ought to be. (Pp. 245-6)

Her prayers were not to be answered, because within less than a year her son also died. He was thirty-three years old. Through circumstances to be described later his two sons were sent to live with their grandparents at Pembroke Lodge, a house in the middle of Richmond Park that was given to them for life by the Queen.

The death of Russell's father was not the end of Lady Russell's sorrows. Her husband had suffered from bad health all his life, and on 28 May 1878 he died at Pembroke Lodge. In 1885 Rollo married, which was a great happiness to his mother. But in little more than a year, soon after the birth of a son, his wife died. And again Countess Russell suffered deeply, "for she always found the sorrows of her children harder to bear than her own" (p. 255).

It seems clear that in spite of all the tragedies that came her way, she never lost her faith in a benevolent God—a faith that was genuine

and a great comfort to her. Her undogmatic religion became even more so as she grew older.

To the end of her life she retained the fervour of her youthful Radicalism, and with advancing years her religious opinions became more and more broad. To her there was no infallibility in any Bible, any prophet, any Church. With an ever-deepening reverence for the life and teaching of Jesus, she yet felt that "The highest revelation is not made by Christ, but comes directly from the Universal Mind to our minds." Her last public appearance in Richmond was at the opening of the new Free Church, on April 16, 1896, which she had joined some years before as being the community holding views nearer to her own than any other. (P. 257¹⁰)

In spite of her undogmatic leanings there were some truths that were beyond discussion. To her, life on earth was a transitional phase and it was up to the individual to behave in such a way as to secure a place in heaven. A person's theological beliefs did not matter much, but when it came to moral behaviour there was no doubt in her mind of a sharp distinction between good and bad. And it was only those who did good who could feel safe that they were walking on "the narrow path that leads to God" (p. 287). In spite of her liberal-mindedness there is no evidence that she believed in the theory of apocatastasis. This made life a serious business. She tried to transplant these beliefs to her children and grandchildren. Already as a girl at Minto she took part in the education of her younger brothers and sisters. In her diary from 1836 she writes: "Chiefly unto children, O Lord, do I feel myself called; in them I see Thy image reflected more pure than in anything else in this sinful though beautiful world, and in serving them my love to Thee increases" (p. 256). In this case the Lord must have heard her prayers, because when she married Lord John Russell, he brought six children with him. His first wife had four from a previous marriage and bore him two more before she died. Lady Russell had four children herself. During the lifetimes of Lord and Lady Amberley their children often spent many months at Pembroke Lodge while their parents were abroad. When Rollo's wife died,

¹⁰ The quotation in this extract is taken from F. W. Robertson, *Sermons, 1st Series*. For some information concerning Robertson, see B. M. G. Reardon, *Religious Thought in the Victorian Age* (London: Longman, 1980), pp. 219–23.

he moved back to Pembroke Lodge with his son and lived there for a few years until he remarried. Although not all of these children adopted her religious views, she influenced them all and not least the young Bertrand Russell. According to her biographers:

One of her greatest pleasures was to see her own ideals and enthusiasms reflected in the young; and next to the care of her family the prosperity of the village school at Petersham was perhaps nearest her heart. It grew and flourished through her devotion. (P. 257)

She never wrote anything on religious education, but she wrote a book for children.¹¹ She published a small volume of selections from the Bible and prayers for daily use called *Family Worship*.¹² This remarkable lady died on 17 January 1898. If one includes the children who had been educated at the Petersham School, of whom many became devoted to her, she was missed by a large number of people. In spite of her Unitarianism and critic of the established Church, she was buried according to the burial service of the Church of England.

I shall now say something about Bertrand's parents and concentrate on his father's religious development, which has great resemblance to that of his own son and to that of many other honest doubters who were brought up under similar circumstances and taught to believe in an Evangelical version of Christianity.

Lord John Russell and Lady Russell were married on 20 July 1841. Their first child was born in December the following year. He received the same name as his father and the title of Viscount Amberley. In his *Autobiography* Russell calls him "philosophical, studious, unworldly, morose, and priggish" (I: 15). Elsewhere he says:

¹¹ It was written in 1893 for her grandson Arthur Russell and published as *Clouds and Sunshine* in 1900 (London: Dent) with illustrations by C. F. Livett.

¹² According to her biographers, it was first published in London in 1876. It was republished with the same title in 1892. In 1920 it was republished as *Home Prayers* with slight alterations by her daughter. I have read this edition, which contains 175 prayers by Lady Russell, but there are no selections from the Bible. The original edition was, according to Frank Russell, used in the daily worship at Pembroke Lodge. See his *My Life and Adventures* (London: Cassell, 1923), p. 50.

His health was bad, and he was tormented by shyness. His mother found fault with him for "moroseness" and his school fellows for "biting wit." He himself passionately deplored these defects, which were due to his social timidity; he longed to be liked, and was deeply grateful for affection; he was an exceptionally loyal friend.... My father's greatest merits were connected with the intellect. His thinking was remarkably honest, and he invariably acted upon the conclusions to which it led him. (AP 1: 143-4)

Amberley was expected to follow in his father's footsteps, and his mother tried to make him a pious Christian. He was educated at home until April 1857, when he went to Harrow. There "he became, under the influence of Dr. Vaughan (the headmaster), deeply religious in a priggish and rather unwholesome way" (*ibid.*, 1: 35). His diary during this time is almost entirely composed of religious and moral reflections. In November 1859, the same year that Darwin's famous book was published, he writes:

Received the Sacrament with a deep sense of my unworthiness & want of preparation. I have of late been more forgetful of God than ever; I have thought of the D[ebating] S[ociety], of anything rather than Him, who has now again permitted me to eat the body & drink the blood of his blessed Son. May he by His mercy strengthen and establish me, & make me more fit to come to His supper next time, if I am spared till then. (AP 1: 179)

After three years at Harrow he spent the academic year 1860-61 at the University of Edinburgh, where his father also had studied. He lived at the house of Professor Alexander Campbell Fraser, the editor of Locke and Berkeley. He taught him philosophy and his wife took good care of him, "with the result that he was always happy in their society" (AP 1: 216). In the autumn of 1861 he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, but was not happy there, and went down in early 1863 without taking a degree. Russell says: "He showed some ability in classics, but none in mathematics; his chief interest was philosophy, and if he had stayed he would have read Moral Science" (1: 220).

At Trinity College his religious feelings grew less, but apparently he remained orthodox. His time at the university was, however, important with regard to the development of his religious beliefs. He met T. J. Sanderson, afterwards Cobden-Sanderson, who held radical religious views, and he read *Essays and Reviews* and other books that made

him question his orthodox views. Immediately after leaving the university, he travelled in Greece and Italy, and after a summer in Scotland, he spent the autumn and spring of 1863-64 at Pembroke Lodge and in London. It was at this time he fell in love with Kate Stanley.

During the year 1863 Amberley's theological views changed drastically, and he came to disbelieve in orthodox Christianity. His character also gradually changed during these years. He was still earnest and religious by temperament, but he became increasingly sceptical and shed the morbid sensibility and sentimentality of his Harrow days (AP 1: 252). In an article in the *North British Review* for November 1863, he presented a closely reasoned argument for relaxation of the doctrinal declarations required of clergymen of the Church of England. His former hero, the headmaster of Harrow, came in for some rather severe criticism (1: 258-64). This was one of the first signs of his changing opinions, and it can be seen as an act of liberation from that kind of Evangelicalism that his mother and Dr. Vaughan represented.

His ideas were at this time changing quickly. In his diary from November 20th the same year he writes:

S[anderson] came down to luncheon & I had a most interesting conversation with him during a walk after lunch. He avows openly that he has entirely given up his belief in revealed religion, & is much of the same opinion as I am on all questions of this nature. He declares to his friends (with greater candour than I have yet reached) that he is no longer a Christian. I hope I may be able to make the avowal, should my views not alter, but I dread the effect, as I should be thought dangerous, & I know not what else. (1: 278)

Considering his political future, he had to be careful about what he said and wrote on religious matters. But his intellectual honesty and his demand for following an argument to its logical conclusion, led him further and further away from the religion in which he was brought up. On his twenty-first birthday he records his troubles with his family and gives a description of his intellectual and moral progress during the past year:

... the studies I have for some time carried on, & am determined to carry on still, have led me to many opinions & aspirations which they cannot understand. ... I fear too that in the course of the present year I have given up—in consequence of more extended knowledge—the faith in a revealed religion to

which they still cling. No doubt they would join heart and soul with me in condemning intolerance, & Mama especially would be in favour of the widest liberty of thought. But a course of religious inquiry (particularly reading Greg's "Creed of Christendom") has led me to feel that I can no longer hold the doctrines which formerly I used to cherish as truths of the highest spiritual value. (AP I: 283)

There is no evidence that Amberley ever read *The Origin of Species* or was much troubled about what he heard about it. In his letters and diaries he mentions three books that seem to have influenced him more than any other literature he read about Christianity and the reliability of the Bible. These are *Essays and Reviews*, which was published in 1860 and soon became the object of intense and heated public discussions, F. W. Newman's *Phases of Faith*, published in 1850 and in its sixth edition ten years later, and W. R. Greg's *The Creed of Christendom*, published the following year. Books like these seem to have had a greater influence on people than Darwin's book, which only contradicted a few orthodox beliefs, and was like many classics more talked about than read. What these books have in common is that they question the whole Bible as a reliable source of information and could be read and comprehended by anyone.

Amberley's reading and thinking led him to the conclusion that the whole system of dogmatic Christianity is built on a false foundation, which in the course of time will be revealed to rest on sand rather than on solid rock. He could not believe that there is any such thing as an inspired book, to which human reason is bound humbly to submit. He could not believe that the miracles recorded in the Gospels really took place. He could not believe that God sent his Son and that his death on the cross had any importance. The idea of Atonement made no sense to him regardless of whether it was interpreted in an Augustinian, Pelagian or some semi-Pelagian way. The idea that some people would be saved while others would be eternally condemned appeared cruel to him and made God look more like an unjust tyrant than a loving and forgiving father.

In spite of his critical thinking he was, however, not yet prepared to give up all his religious beliefs, but they were steadily approaching the slow death by a thousand reformulations. He had a few temporary stops ahead of him before he reached the end station of his thinking. In the same entry of his diary as quoted above he continues:

Deeply aware, then, of the fallibility of my judgement & the very limited means of judging, I as yet possess, I nevertheless can see that I have honestly endeavoured to arrive at Truth so that however greatly my opinions may change hereafter, & I doubt not they will greatly change—I have come now, not hastily, but painfully & reluctantly, to give up entirely my faith in "Christianity," as that much abused word is commonly understood. Whatever is noble, or beautiful or true in the teaching of Christ; whatever, that is, I can feel, without asking for proof, to be so; that I thankfully accept. The high & self-denying morality I find in the Bible, I acknowledge & admire, though I do maintain that the morality, even of the Bible requires to be corrected and improved by the enlightened Reason of man wherever it appears to be defective. But I am a follower of Christ only as far as his name retains its original purity, unencumbered by superstitious dogmas which religious credulity has fastened upon it. What is called "the Divinity of Christ" I regard as incomprehensible, & cannot receive. I am therefore at the present moment what is called a "Deist". (AP I: 284)

One result of Amberley's thinking was that he could no longer pray as he once did. He could not believe that there is any special interference for our benefit on the part of Providence. This was painful to him, but he trusted that the truth would vindicate itself by supplying him with something better than the comfort of prayer. He wondered if the notion of universal order could not take such hold on the mind as to fill it with a conception of the creator far more satisfying to human aspiration than anything which popular Christianity can give. He was not sure, but he trusted that the change which he was going through, causing at the time so much mental anxiety and the rupture of so many cherished associations, would in some way be fraught with good to himself and others as well.

He realized that one day he could come to a position from which his ideas could influence the general public, and when that day came he wanted to be able to state his convictions honestly. He did not have to worry so much about the reaction of his own family, though his views were rapidly developing in a direction that even his tolerant mother could not embrace. It was more the reaction of the general public he had to consider, since he was soon going to enter politics, but before that he hoped to marry Kate Stanley.

He had known of her from an early age since they both belonged to aristocratic families and lived in the same area, but it was not until 1863 that they fell in love. Bertrand Russell had no memories of her

and knew her only from her diary and letters: she was "vigorous, lively, witty, serious, original, and fearless. Judging by her pictures she must also have been beautiful" (*Auto.* 1: 15). She was born earlier the same year as Amberley. According to Russell her "mind and character were exactly suited to his changed mood: nowhere else had he met goodness combined with gaiety and sceptical intelligence" (*AP* 1: 252).

When it became evident that they were falling in love with each other, Lady Russell did everything that was in her power to prevent an engagement on the grounds that they were too young. She insisted on a six months' separation, during which there was to be no contact and both were to remain free. But after six months they still wanted to marry, and Lady Russell made the best of it. But their relations with her were never wholly free from strain, except for a short time immediately after the marriage. According to Russell his grandmother "instinctively hated her children's marriages, both from maternal jealousy and from horror of sex" (*AP* 1: 144). He should know what he was talking about, since when the time came when he himself wanted to marry for the first time, he had to endure a similar treatment.

During the separation of six months in 1864, Amberley met John Stuart Mill and was much impressed. Later he and his wife became friends with Mill and his step-daughter, Helen Taylor, and they were both much influenced by Mill's political and philosophical ideas. When Bertrand was born, John Stuart Mill and Helen Taylor became his non-religious godparents.¹³

Amberley's views continued to develop rapidly. At a dinner in early June with his friends George Grote and his wife, who also were disciples of Mill and freethinkers, they discussed the origin of Christianity. The Grotes saw Paul rather than Jesus as the founder. This was a new idea to Amberley, which he adopted. When he came home, he wrote in his diary:

On looking back at what I wrote in December I found that I then put myself down as a "Deist," a name I am now most anxious to disclaim. I dislike any title that might seem to bind me to the doctrines of a sect & thus limit my

¹³ For information concerning the relationship between the Amberleys and J. S. Mill and Helen Taylor, see Ann Robson's article, "Bertrand Russell and His Godless Parents", *Russell*, 7 (autumn 1972): 3-9.

freedom. Such things are narrow & oblige one to *define* the name of God, which I think it undesirable to do. Why should I either believe or disbelieve in Deity? his existence or his goodness? Is it not enough to feel that one is surrounded by Infinite Mystery, & knows nothing? (*AP* 1: 302)

Amberley's ideas were now far away from the orthodox theistic interpretation of Christianity that he was taught as a child. His flirting with deism seems to have been a short intellectual romance, and he was now becoming influenced by Herbert Spencer and other agnostic thinkers.

Although Kate's religious views were liberal and she had also read *Essays and Reviews* and been influenced by it, she still considered herself a Christian and went to Communion. This was problematic to Amberley since he thought he had good arguments on his side not to participate in religious ceremonies, and he wanted his future wife to act and think the way he did in such an important matter as religion.

In October they had been reunited for a few weeks. Owing to his lack of belief in the Christian doctrines, Amberley had not taken the Sacrament since last summer and for some time he had not even gone to Church. But as he found that Kate in spite of her doctrinal agreement with him still continued to take the Sacrament as a spiritual refreshment, he decided, after a mental struggle, to join her one Sunday. In his diary he justified his joining her in this act of worship.

First it seems to me that the fact of my differing from Christians about their *doctrines* need not prevent my joining with them in prayer & thanksgiving, which are as needful for me as for them. Of course there is much in the established Liturgy which I cannot adopt; e.g. the mystical significance attached to Christ's death, or the allusions to him as the Son of God. All this I have to pass over. But must I refuse altogether to take advantage of common worship, because the mode of worshipping is not as perfect as I could wish? Surely this would be a harsh conclusion. In church I feel that I am united to those around me by ties far closer than those of Creed. I differ from them in much, but I agree with them in much more. We equally desire to acknowledge a Father in heaven; to pray for his assistance; to invoke his blessing. This being the case I am content to adopt the only available methods of giving a public expression to these feelings, while I do not cease to regret the constant intrusion in our services of the phraseology of popular belief. For myself, I am compelled to worship spiritually; to look not at the

superficial form which religious feeling takes, but at the essential nature; to penetrate below the accidental errors to the universal truth that lies below it.

His love for Kate seems to have blurred his mind for a while. From what he had written earlier in his diary, one would hardly expect him to talk about God as “a Father in heaven” and find any point in praying for his assistance. But this wavering of mind only shows how difficult it was for him to find a dogmatically acceptable and spiritually satisfying substitute for his old faith in a God who listens to prayer. He was looking for a creed that summarized the best in all religions. According to him there was an element of truth in all religions, but no single religion contained the whole truth. With this reasoning he thought he could justify his participation in any religious ceremony.

There was, however, a problem that lay ahead of him. He wanted to marry Kate, but he had reservations concerning certain formulations in the marriage service. He asked Dean Arthur Stanley if it was possible to leave out the words “In the name of the Father, the Son & the Holy Ghost”. Dean Stanley said it was impossible because they were marked words in an important part of the service. Amberley was broadminded enough not to refuse to employ them, but he explained to Dean Stanley that the phrase had no meaning to him.

To Amberley and many other earnest Bible-readers, including his own mother, the doctrine of the Trinity was an intellectual stumbling-block, but he found ways around it. At this time the Unitarians were offering a compromise that appeared acceptable to many who could not totally subscribe to the Thirty-nine Articles.¹⁴

During the courtship with Kate and for some time after their wedding, Amberley tried to bring her over to his position. After some resistance he succeeded. He encouraged her to read Newman's *Phases of Faith*, a book that his mother found shocking because the author did not consider Jesus immaculate (*AP* I: 332). He and Kate disagreed about Baptism for a while. Eventually he convinced her that the idea of the inherited sinfulness of the new-born child was unacceptable.

¹⁴ For information concerning the impact of the Unitarians in England, see H. McLachlan, *The Unitarian Movement in the Religious Life of England* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1934).

When the time came, none of their children were baptised. He worked hard on trying to convince her that she was not a Christian in the ordinary sense of the word, and that disbelief in Christian dogmas did not diminish a person's religiosity and sense of morality; it was rather the opposite. In a letter to her written a few weeks before their wedding he writes:

... one of my chief objects, an object I have kept steadily before me ever since I ceased to believe in Christian doctrines, is to prove that such unbelief has in it nothing godless, but is consistent with a deep religious feeling, & with goodness & purity of life. ... it shall be mine [my work] to elaborate my theories in written arguments, but it shall be yours to prove by daily, constant example, that Christian virtues in their purest, their most perfect form may exist apart from the remotest tincture of Christian dogma. Thus shall we strive to increase the charity of men towards each other, & mitigate their bitterness. And we will not demand Toleration only at the hands of our friends, but much more Justice. Let them be shocked & pained at first if it must be so; (though I hope even this may be avoided) but when the first violence of their surprise or their resentment is over, we will ask them if after all, we are worse than other men; we will ask them to confess, if not at once by the force of reason then later by the force of facts that the fruits of the Spirit may be granted to those who have flung off the ancient creeds as chaff, & stand upright, pure, & noble without their aid. We will ask them: yes! and they shall confess it! (*AP* I: 340-1)

As it turned out, very few of their old acquaintances could accept their views on religion and even less so their views on birth-control and women's suffrage. The idea of “religion without dogma” was not uncommon among liberal-minded people in those days. Their youngest son also propagated similar views for a while, but neither he nor his father was very successful in convincing orthodox believers that it was as sinful to believe too much as it was to believe too little. The way Amberley saw it, it was he and not the orthodox who showed the deeper faith in God. God had bestowed upon man an intellect and a power to reason that was of greater importance in understanding Him than any inherited dogma. It was man's duty to think for himself and be tolerant of those who believed differently as long as they really did their own thinking and not just repeated what some authority had told them. He believed at this time that in this way human beings would come to a deeper spiritual understanding of God's nature and

that eventually all theological controversies could be laid aside and everyone could worship the same true God. Amberley's liberal views were, however, as utopian and unacceptable to his contemporaries as they are today. Then as now most people preferred the religion in which they were brought up, without really giving other religions a fair trial, and then as now they were prepared to fight and even kill, if necessary, for their inherited prejudices.

Amberley and Kate were married at Alderley on 8 November 1865 and spent their honeymoon at Woburn, which had been lent to them by the Duke of Bedford. The chief events of the following year were Amberley's unsuccessful candidature at Leeds and the birth of their eldest son, Frank. After his marriage Amberley lived the comfortable life of a gentleman and soon made plans for *An Analysis of Religious Belief*, his main intellectual project for the next ten years.

His wife, who was a remarkably attractive and intellectually energetic woman, achieved for them a small place in the social life of England's radical intelligentsia. George Grote and his wife were guests and friends, as were John Stuart Mill and his stepdaughter. Fredric Harrison, whose review of *Essays and Reviews* started the debate about this volume that lasted for many years, was for a time close to the Amberleys.¹⁵ Herbert Spencer was part of their set, along with T. H. Huxley, Dean Stanley, France Power Cobbe, Benjamin Jowett and a host of lesser lights. Amberley's letters and journal reveal a life that has about it an air of fastidious retreat. Of a piece with this picture is his taste for poetry, especially German romantic poetry, which was entirely in harmony with his philosophical emphasis on the importance of feeling. His study was a comfortable refuge from the vulgar world—that refused to be enlightened—as much as it was a workshop.¹⁶

In 1866 Amberley was elected to Parliament for Nottingham. A rumour was out that he and his wife had proclaimed themselves Unitarians. After a visit to Mrs. Grote, Kate wrote in her diary:

¹⁵ He later became a good friend of Amberley's mother, and it was he who delivered the memorial address at the Memorial Service that was held in her honour in July 1900. See appendix to *Lady John Russell*, pp. 305–8.

¹⁶ For more information on Amberley's social connections, see R. J. Helmstadter's unpublished paper, "Lord Amberley's Science of Religion", on file in RA.

It is not true, I told her; but I argued with her & disagreed as to the rightness & propriety of calling oneself Church of England when one disagreed with it. She said she called herself so always. I said I would not—but I was a Christian in my sense of the word—She pressed me to deny the Unitarian rumour—I said I would as we were not that & certainly had made no profession of faith to anyone, but on the whole Unitarianism according to Channing, pleased me most, or Theodore Parker's. (AP 1: 45)

By this time Kate seems to have adopted the views of her husband more or less completely. Now they no longer had to argue with each other on religious matters. The problem was now to state their own views as candidly as possible without offending others. This was hard to do at a time when minor differences of opinion on theological questions often were enough to estrange old friends. Since Amberley wrote less in his diary after he was married, it is difficult to follow the development of his religious views in detail, but there is no reason to believe that he would be satisfied with any version of Unitarianism at this point. He was now avoiding giving any particular name to his convictions, but the pair were moving towards Agnosticism, which to many orthodox believers was just another euphemism for atheism. And from this label he tried to disassociate himself, considering both what he actually believed and that it would be bad for his political career.

In 1866–67 Amberley published in the *Fortnightly Review* an article in two parts on "The Church of England as a Religious Body". He argued that, since the Church is a national institution, and since men pay tithes regardless of their opinions, all theological doctrines ought to be equally open to clergymen. He went on to point out that tests are never imposed except where the truth is doubtful:

No one thinks of asking that a public instructor—the master of a school or the university professor—should declare his entire adherence to the multiplication table, or promise to teach nothing contrary to Euclid's Elements of Geometry. Upon these matters, and many others with regard to which all instructed men are agreed, uniformity of teaching is taken for granted. It is in those cases alone where some difference of opinion, and consequently some doubt and some uncertainty prevail, that any restriction is imposed on the freedom of the teacher. (AP 2: 103)

Concerning the first part of Amberley's argument, i.e. the teaching

of Euclid's geometry, around this time it was becoming an issue of discussion among mathematicians whether Euclid's geometry really was the only possible one. Amberley was not aware of this, but when it became known that Euclid's axiom of parallels was not as self-evident as once believed, it prompted some theologians and philosophers to reconsider their views on apodeictic knowledge.¹⁷ Apart from this Amberley had a point, but like many of his views, it was too subtle to impress the general public. The article ends with a conclusion that was bound to upset the clergy and orthodox believers:

In all cases except that of theology, it would be a truism to say that we ought to be acquainted with both sides of the question before we judge. In theology alone it is still thought that the best way of promoting truth is to listen only to one half of the evidence, while—even by upright and honourable men—the other half is either carelessly neglected or wilfully suppressed. (AP 2: 104)

Later in 1867, the year the second Reform Act was passed by a Conservative government, the Amberleys visited North America. They left in August and returned just after the New Year. Their daughter Rachel and a twin who never breathed were born prematurely in March 1868. Later the same year Amberley was nominated as a Liberal candidate for South Devon. In a public notice to the electors he said that some points of the act needed reconsideration, but there were two issues, relating to religious equality, that concerned him in particular: the disestablishment of the Church in Ireland and that the various privileges and offices of the two universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and of Trinity College, Dublin, should be opened to dissenters of every kind (AP 2: 125–7).

These were ideas that could be expected from a Liberal candidate, but it was his views on other issues that made him impossible as a candidate. Neither Kate's journal nor the letters from her and Amberley to friends give any picture of the storm that raged on the subject of his theological and ethical opinions. Clergymen who had been lifelong Liberals thought that his views on observance of the Lord's

¹⁷ See I. Toth, "Gott und Geometrie: eine Viktorische Kontroverse", in *Schriftenreihe der Universität Regensburg*, 7 (1982): 141–203.

Day were intolerable. Large posters asked in headlines: "Is Lord Amberley a Christian?" and gave quotations from his writings to prove the negative. These obstacles might have been overcome, for the farmers liked his views on rabbits, which he thought they should be allowed to kill, and the non-conformists had a long-standing quarrel with the Conservative candidate. But a graver matter, more outrageous even than infidelity, was brought up against him. He had defended the idea of birth-control as a way of coming to terms with overpopulation and the improvement of public health. This upset religious people of all creeds, and he was also accused of having insulted the medical profession. The upshot was that Amberley never again became a candidate for Parliament. From this time on he had less and less to do with politics and instead worked more intensively on his book on religion (AP 2: 166–249).

The following years Amberley read extensively about different religions. He published some articles, wrote letters and continued to meet friends and his family. The discussions continued to be about religion, politics and literature. His radical views were not shared by his family, but they tolerated them although they deplored his association with the Positivist group.

There are few documents from this period that reveal anything about his own religion and conception of God, but in early January 1872 he wrote a prayer in his diary that says something of his personal religion. It starts: "Infinite & mysterious Power, let thy spirit be ever with me in time of trouble as in time of joy." And it ends: "Oh then, help, comfort & strengthen me, & may every trial & sorrow of this life but bring me nearer to the goodness towards which I aspire; & from which I am still so far" (AP 2: 482–3). Apart from his way of addressing God, this prayer sounds like an ordinary theistic prayer that implies that he conceived the divine power to be a person of some sort who listened to his needs and aspirations. Russell says that "In the winter of 1871–2, he seems to have had more inclination towards religious practice than he had for many years, and more than he had later" (2: 482). The reason for this is not clear, but within the following years things were to happen that would change his conception of God. Before that, however, a positive event occurred.

On 18 May 1872 their second son was born. After some discussions with the family about what to call him, they decided upon Bertrand

Arthur William. But the following year the first of the disasters that befell the Amberleys occurred. Amberley had what was diagnosed as an epileptic seizure. The effect was to introduce an element of gloom in the house. The death of Mill the same year was a sorrow and the engagement of Douglas Spalding as tutor, who was a Darwinian and was allowed to have chickens running around in the house, was considered by their friends, and particularly by Amberley's parents, a serious misfortune. Spalding was already in an advanced stage of consumption and died not very long after Amberley. Russell says in his *Autobiography* that "Apparently upon grounds of pure theory, my father and mother decided that although he ought to remain childless on account of his tuberculosis, it was unfair to expect him to be celibate. My mother therefore, allowed him to live with her, though I know of no evidence that she derived any pleasure from doing so" (1: 17). This was typical of the Amberleys' views on the relationship between theory and practice; if they believed something to be true, they said so and acted accordingly.

From this time onwards, the material becomes scanty. A great deal was destroyed by Amberley's parents after his death in order to preserve secrecy concerning what had been going on with Spalding.

In December the Amberleys went on a trip to Europe and brought Spalding and Frank with them. On the return journey in May Frank developed diphtheria. He was immediately isolated, and Kate and her sister nursed him in London. When he was better, and believed to be no longer infectious, the other children were taken from Pembroke Lodge, and the whole family went home to their house in the country. But in those days it was not realized that the diphtheria bacillus can linger in the air passages long after the illness is past. Not long after they had settled down it was discovered that Rachel had developed the disease. Within a few days Kate also became very sick. She died, and in a few days Rachel was dead, too. Amberley wrote to his mother:

I thought the cup of misery had been full enough, but it seems not. The child too had to go, and I have lost for ever the sweet caressing ways and the affectionate heart that might if anything could have been some consolation. And now I feel that the desolation is indeed complete. Yet I think I must be almost dead to feeling, for Rachel's death seemed hardly to add to my sorrow. But I know how I shall feel it hereafter when I miss her. Of all the children she was the dearest to me, and so my two greatest treasures in this

world are gone almost at one blow. It is cruel, unspeakably cruel! I know how you will feel for me dearest Mama. (AP 2: 571)

From this time Amberley stayed most of the time at home and only noted in his diary what he had been reading in preparation for his book. He wished to finish it, but apart from that he had lost all his zest for life. He wrote the dedication to his wife in November 1875. Sometime after he had an attack of bronchitis, and a few days before his death in January he wrote to his mother the well-known letter at the beginning of Russell's *Autobiography* (1: 18-19).

Amberley's last hours are described in a letter from his sister-in-law to his mother. With him at the end were his two sons, a doctor and Lizzy, who was the family servant for many years and the one whose report this letter is based on.

... Amberley asked Lizzy again not to leave him & as she stood close to his bedside he said "Do not go away"—then he said "Help me oh Lizzy help me" & she said "how can I help you" & he said "pray for me" & then she said some prayers asking God to cast a pitying eye on the bed of affliction & that she trusted God would receive his soul which was near the gate of Heaven—& many other things that came to her mind—Lizzy said "are you happy My lord" & he said "Yes Lizzy happy, quite happy, & it is long to wait—but it will soon be over with me now"—Lizzy asked him to speak to Frank—he muttered something & said "it is all done"—Frank remained sobbing & crying so that his Father's hand was wet with his tears. The Dr. lifted Bertrand up & he kissed him gently & softly & said "Goodbye my little dears for ever." He then lay perfectly quiet with a smile, never moved or shut his hands, but the breathing at last ceased at 9.30. (AP 2: 576)

Amberley died as he had lived. It was only logical that he should ask Lizzy to pray for him, because according to his conception of God, which he had explained in his book to be unknowable, there was not much he could pray to or pray for. Although there was much in *An Analysis of Religious Belief* that must have been horrifying to his mother, it was she who saw that it was published the same year. In an address to the reader she wrote:

May those who find in it their most cherished beliefs questioned or condemned, their surest consolations set at naught, remember that he had not shrunk from pain and anguish to himself, as one by one he parted with

portions of that faith which in boyhood and early youth had been the main-spring of his life.¹⁸

The book was published at a time when the interest in this kind of literature was at its peak, but it was not a success. It got very few reviews, and all were critical. It is hardly mentioned by anyone who has written about this kind of literature.¹⁹ The London edition was in two volumes; an American edition in one volume was published the following year. The American publisher's preface says that the appearance of this book "caused not a little excitement in England, and its introduction into our country had much the same effect here." This was not true, but there comes an even greater distortion of the truth:

When it is remembered that after his death urgent efforts were made—and from high sources too—to suppress his work; that the powerful Duke of Bedford, backed by Lord John Russell himself, tried to buy up the entire edition issued it is enough to make every sympathetic and enquiring person anxious to read the results of his labour of years.²⁰

There is no evidence that supports these statements, which were probably fabricated to make the book sell better than it had in England.

The book is a study in comparative religion and a critique of all theological systems and particularly of Christianity. It is divided into two parts. The first consists of a comparison of the world's religions. In the section on the founders of the major religions, Confucius, Lao-tzu, Buddha, Zarathustra and Muhammad are allotted a few pages each while Jesus Christ gets 170. In the section on holy books the Koran is given eight pages and the Bible 125. The space devoted to the various religious systems is so disproportionate that no real comparison was possible.

¹⁸ John Russell (Viscount Amberley), *An Analysis of Religious Belief* (London: Trübner, 1876), p. iii.

¹⁹ The only reference to it that I have seen is in J. M. Robertson, *A History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century*, 2 vols. (London: Watts, 1929), who devotes one page to it. He says: "The book must have been found highly convincing by most of its readers, but they do not seem to have been many, as it appears to have received little notice" (2: 415).

²⁰ *An Analysis of Religious Belief* (New York: D. M. Bennett; Liberal and Scientific Publishing House, 1877), pp. 3-4.

The division of the book into two parts is based on a distinction between "Faith" and "Belief". The first part consists of more than 600 pages devoted to the external manifestations of religious sentiment, which he calls "Belief". The second part, which has not quite a hundred pages but is the most interesting and original, is concerned with the religious sentiment itself, which he calls "Faith".

From his studies Amberley drew two conclusions: the universality of some kind of religious perception or religious feeling and the countless variety of forms under which that feeling has made its appearance. He saw it as a distinction between substance and form: "Faith is a term of large and general signification, referring rather to the feelings than the reason; whereas Belief generally implies the intellectual adoption of some definite proposition, capable of distinct statement in words" (p. 23). He was probably influenced to make this distinction by reading Newman's *Phases of Faith* where it also occurs.²¹ On the basis of an analysis of people's "Faith" Amberley postulated an undogmatic "Universal Religion". According to him scientific discoveries and philosophical inquiries, so fatal to other creeds, do not touch this religion, the main claim of which is the recognition of the unattainability of knowledge in religious matters. It all sounds a bit paradoxical, but in a way no answer is also an answer:

They who accept it can but desire the increase of knowledge, for even though new facts and deeper reasoning should overthrow something of what they have hitherto believed and taught, they will rejoice that their mistakes should be corrected, and their imperfections brought to light. They desire but the Truth, and the Truth has made them free. (*Anal. of Religious Belief*, p. 725)

It is hard to understand how he thought he could convince anyone to adopt such a religion since according to him nothing can be known about God, except that God exists. He referred to his god as "The Unknowable", "The Infinite Being" or "The Unknowable Reality", which does not admit of "definition, comprehension, or description". This deity is not personal and does not listen to prayers. Russell says that "His religious views became almost exactly those of Herbert Spencer. He believed in an Unknowable which, or who, could be

²¹ See Helmstadter, p. 15.

regarded with religious veneration but was not personal" (AP 1: 35). And, although Amberley is a bit vague, he did not believe in any personal existence after death. When we die, we "return" to the Infinite Being (*Analysis of Religious Belief*, p. 710).

It is easy to understand how Amberley's religion has not caught on among those looking for a new one. The last pages of the book show, according to Russell, that "he then expected and half wished to die" (AP 2: 573). He died without any expectation of seeing his beloved ones again. The only thing he was looking forward to was peace.

Before concluding my history of Russell's family's religious background, I shall say something about the religious development of Russell's older brother, Frank, and what he has written about the education he received from his parents and the religious habits he was exposed to when he moved to Pembroke Lodge.

His parents were married on 8 November 1864, and he was born on 12 August 1865 "in strict accordance with the best English tradition of family duty".²² He resembled the Stanleys more than the Russells both in appearance and temperament. From an early age he showed signs of a strong character and independence of mind.

By the time of his birth he says that his parents were both complete agnostics. He continues:

I do not mean by that I was brought up in any defiant, aggressive, or combantant attitude to the ordinary tenets of the Christian religion, but simply in complete ignorance of, and indifference to, them. I was never taken to church, I never heard of God, I was never troubled with the desires, wishes, or purposes, of a Supreme Being. The only definite threat to religion in my early education was the fact that I was taught to think for myself and to use and trust my reason. (*Ibid.*, p. 334)

When his father died, he wanted Spalding and Cobden-Sanderson, both atheists, to become guardians of his two sons in order to protect them from the evils of a religious upbringing (*Auto.* 1: 17). His grandparents did, however, find out from the Amberleys' diaries and letters what had been going on in relation to their mother. This discovery caused them, in Russell's phrase, the utmost Victorian horror,

²² F. Russell, *My Life and Adventures*, p. 11.

and they decided to rescue innocent children from the clutches of intriguing infidels. Amberley's wish was ignored, and the two boys were made wards of Chancery. Not long after Amberley's death they were brought over to Pembroke Lodge to live with their grandparents.

One can speculate on how their lives would have developed, if this had not happened. It was, however, a minor event compared to the loss of their parents. Bertrand was too young to know what was going on, but to Frank it was a change for the worse: "To come from the free air of Ravenscroft into this atmosphere of insincerities, conventions, fears, and bated breath, was like a nightmare to me, young as I was, and during all the years I had to endure it the P. L. atmosphere never ceased to be a nightmare" (*My Life and Adventures*, p. 33). At this time the Russell family consisted of Earl and Countess Russell and Agatha and Rollo. To the household of Pembroke Lodge also belonged a large number of employees, but the most important and powerful person in the house was Lady John. Lord John was too old and weak to have any important influence on the boys. Frank writes:

The Russell ideas of life differed in almost every respect from those in which I had hitherto been brought up. While the attitude of my father and mother was to face life unashamed and unafraid with the unbowed head of Henley, the Pembroke Lodge attitude was one of halting, of diffidence, of doubt, fears and hesitations, reticences and suppressions, and of a sort of mournful Christian humility. (P. 33)

There is no doubt that Frank found it hard to adopt himself to this new environment. He had great difficulties in accepting the strict discipline that his grandmother demanded of him. They often quarrelled, and twice he tried to run away. In spite of all this he has some good things to say about her. She was "... one of the best women who ever lived. She was witty, amusing, kind, even devoted, full of a sense of duty, and of considerable toleration, though rather from loyalty to the traditions of the Whigs than from any inborn conviction that other points of view were really tolerable" (*ibid.*).

Although his grandmother had some good qualities, they were not enough to make Frank feel comfortable under her regime. It was her intention to save him from the awful contamination of public schools. But Frank insisted, and after some time she agreed to send him to Winchester. But "Bertie, whom they caught younger and who was

more amenable, did enjoy the full benefits of a home education in the atmosphere of love, with the result that till he went to Cambridge he was an unendurable little prig" (p. 38).

Frank's description of daily life at Pembroke Lodge shows how important discipline and religion were.

The usual routine of my life at P. L. at this time began with prayers in the morning, which all the servants attended, a Moody and Sankey hymn, a portion of scripture, and a prayer read by my grandmother from a volume of her own compiling. Breakfast, which all attended, a short interval, and then lessons till twelve. (P. 50)

This daily routine was complemented by regular churchgoing on Sundays, and in the evenings Lady Russell read sermons by Dean Farrar, Matthew Arnold or someone else she thought edifying enough. Different members of the family went to different churches, and when they came home they discussed what they had heard. Judging from Frank's diary he participated in all this with keen interest. In it he noted who had preached where and about what and made a judgment of the quality. A typical example from his diary is: "Went to Haslemere church with Granny: Auntie went to the Congregational & was so pleased with the sermon there, that she went again in the evening with U[ncl]e R[ollo] & Bertie.... We had the vicar Mr. Ethridge to preach to-day, he is far superior to the curate & has a fine voice."²³

Although Frank was brought up with prayers, singing and sermons, he says that "I am practically certain that I never received any definite religious propaganda from my grandmother Russell, but of course the atmosphere of the house was religious" (p. 334). Encouraged by his grandmother's aversion for dogmatic theology and due to his own independence of mind, he never accepted all the orthodox dogma. But during his time at Winchester he became much influenced by the High Church tradition:

... for a period of three years of my life [I] was a consistent and devoted High Churchman. I learnt to cross myself, to genuflect, to approve of Gregorians (which, anyhow, I delighted in), to observe the feasts of the Church,

²³ Frank Russell's diary, 23 September 1883 (RAI 731.080043, p. 29).

and even to know the appropriate colours of the stoles and bookmarkers. ... I adored the services of the Church and felt very near to Christ. Curiously enough my grandmother Russell was almost more disturbed by my High Church phase than by my agnosticism: her Presbyterian spirit was opposed to forms and ceremonies and suspected them. (P. 336)

It was the reading of two books that started to undermine his faith. The first was Tom Paine's *The Age of Reason*. And when he was eighteen, he started to read Sinnott's *Esoteric Buddhism* and was influenced by that for a while (p. 336). Finally he gave up all this and came closer to the views of Lucretius and his brother as they are expressed in his essay "A Free Man's Worship", which he quotes with approval. Although he considered the average person rather evil and stupid, he hoped that one day he would improve and that "the Brotherhood of Man may achieve that reality which the Christian religion tried to give it by representing all men as sons of one Father" (p. 343). This pious hope was something he shared with most members of his family. In the chapter "Religion and Conduct" he writes:

There must ... be something in the Russell blood which prevents their being indifferent about religion and makes it impossible for them to avoid concerning themselves with it. My grandfather wrote a "History of the Christian Religion," my father wrote "The Analysis of Religious Belief," and I have myself been guilty of a religious work. (P. 334²⁴)

Whether the Russells' concern for religion was due to a genetic factor or an environmental one, it is difficult to say. It probably depended on a combination of both. While we know very little about the genetic factor, we do know some things about the beliefs and values of those Victorians who made up the social network in which Bertrand Russell was born and grew up and some of whose beliefs he never abandoned. Why he adopted, gave up or continued to defend a certain belief, is difficult to say, but we can see who and what influ-

²⁴ His own work is *Lay Sermons* (London: Thomas Burleigh, 1902). He could have mentioned his aunt, Agatha Russell, who compiled a book of edifying quotations with the title *Gleanings Grave and Gay* (London: Longmans, Green, 1931). And he could also have mentioned his brother, who wrote approximately 200 books, essays, articles and reviews in which he discusses religion.

enced him most.

The full story of Bertrand Russell's views on religion and his own religious yearnings has not been written. The Russell that most people think of today is the late Russell who would rather take poison than to bow to a God whose existence could not be proved with certainty. But that is only the late Russell who in the ears of the pious and orthodox again sounded as a ridiculer of sacred beliefs. He had done it before in "Why I Am Not a Christian" (1927) and in some other articles. In the beginning it was not so. Russell lived a long life, and his views on religion and his own religiosity developed through the years. He talks about his 1901 experience of "mystic illumination" in his *Autobiography*, but he never revealed anything about "a second conversion" that he experienced ten years later. Russell early developed a strong yearning for religious comfort. He wanted to have something to believe in that would make life endurable. When he no longer could get any comfort out of religion, he tried to derive religion out of his search for certainty in mathematics. This worked for a while, but at the end he had to confess that his search for religious comfort and certainty was vain. He had not found either, but he had found something that was much better: he had a dream about the Good Life that was to be inspired by love and guided by knowledge. It was not a religious vision in the traditional sense, but it was a vision he held with strong emotions. In a way Russell can be seen as a typical example of a religious heart combined with a sceptical intellect, which prevented him from making a Kierkegaardian leap of faith. Russell had one radical demand that all his beliefs had to meet: that they be supported by good arguments. Certainty might be found in logic, but logic only tells us what we already know. If we want to know something about the world it has to be through our senses, and they can always fool us. This was the view he held at the end of his life.

His grandmother's religiosity had a great influence on the young Bertrand, but intellectually he could not accept her idea of a personal God. When he read his father's diaries and saw that he had gone through the same kind of religious doubt that he had, it made a strong impression on him. His father was a sceptic who demanded the support of good reasons for a belief before he adopted it. Russell and his father came to the conclusion that they had no good reason to believe in the existence of a personal God, one who listens to prayers,

etc., and they confessed it and acted accordingly. The gravity that her grandmother's piety exerted was not strong enough to keep him within the orbit of orthodox religion. He saw himself as a free citizen of the universe, and his intellect told him that in matters of truth, he should not be governed by his hopes and emotions.