**B. Russell “MY RELIGIOUS REMINISCENCES”**

My parents, Lord and Lady Amberley, were considered shocking in their day on account of their advanced opinions in politics, theology, and morals. When my mother died in 1874 she was buried without any religious ceremony in the grounds of their house in the Wye Valley. My father intended to be buried there also, but when he died in 1876 his wishes were disregarded, and both were removed to the family vault at Chenies. By my father’s will my brother and I were to have been in the guardianship of two friends of his who shared his opinions, but the will was set aside and we were placed by the Court of Chancery in the care of my grandparents. My grandfather, the statesman, died in 1878, and it was his widow who decided the manner of my education. She was a Scotch Presbyterian, who gradually became a Unitarian. I was taken on alternate Sundays to the Parish Church and to the Presbyterian Church, while at home I was taught the tenets of Unitarianism. Eternal punishment and the literal truth of the Bible were not inculcated, and there was no Sabbatarianism beyond a suggestion of avoiding cards on Sunday for fear of shocking the servants. But in other respects morals were austere, and it was held to be certain that conscience, which is the voice of God, is an infallible guide in all practical perplexities. My childhood was solitary, as my brother was seven years older than I was, and I was not sent to school. Consequently I had abundant leisure for reflection, and when I was about fourteen my thoughts turned to theology. During the four following years I rejected, successively, free will, immortality, and belief in God, and believed that I suffered much pain in the process, though when it was completed I found myself far happier than I had been while I remained in doubt. I think, in retrospect, that loneliness had much more to do with my unhappiness than theological difficulties, for throughout the whole time I never said a word about religion to anyone, with the brief exception of an Agnostic tutor, who was soon sent away, presumably because he did not discourage my unorthodoxy. What kept me silent was mainly the fear of ridicule. At the age of fourteen I became convinced that the fundamental principle of ethics should be the promotion of human happiness, and at first this appeared to me so selfevident that I supposed it must be the universal opinion. Then I discovered, to my surprise, that it was a view regarded as unorthodox, and called Utilitarianism. I announced, no doubt with a certain pleasure in the long word, that I was a Utilitarian; but the announcement was received with derision. My grandmother for a long time missed no opportunity of ironically submitting ethical conundrums to me, and challenging me to solve them on Utilitarian principles. To my surprise I discovered, in preparing the Amberley Papers, that she had subjected an uncle of mine, in his youth, to the same treatment on the same topic. The result in my case was a determination to keep my thoughts to myself; no doubt in his it was similar. Ridicule, nominally amusing but really an expression of hostility, was the favourite weapon—the worst possible, short of actual cruelty, in dealing with young people. When I became interested in philosophy—a subject which, for some reason, was anathema—I was told that the whole subject could be summed up in the saying: ‘What is mind?—No matter. What is matter?—Never mind.’ At the fifteenth or sixteenth repetition of this remark it ceased to be amusing. Nevertheless on most topics the atmosphere was liberal. For instance, Darwinism was accepted as a matter of course. I had at one time, when I was thirteen, a very orthodox Swiss tutor, who, in consequence of something I had said, stated with great earnestness: ‘If you are a Darwinian I pity you, for one cannot be a Darwinian and a Christian at the same time.’ I did not then believe in the incompatibility, but I was already clear that, if I had to choose, I would choose Darwin. Until I went to Cambridge I was almost wholly unaware of contemporary movements of thought. I was influenced by Darwin, and then by John Stuart Mill, but more than either by the study of dynamics; my outlook, in fact, was more appropriate to a seventeenth- or eighteenth-century Cartesian than to a post-Darwinian. It seemed to me that all the motions of matter were determined by physical laws, and that in all likelihood this was true of the human body as well as of other matter. Being passionately interested in religion and unable to speak about it, I wrote down my thoughts in Greek letters in a book which I headed ‘Greek Exercises’, in which, to make concealment more complete, I adopted an original system of phonetic spelling. In this book, when I was fifteen, I wrote: ‘Taking free will first to consider, there is no clear dividing line between man and the protozoon. Therefore, if we give free will to man we must give it also to the protozoon. This is rather hard to do. 4 the basic writings of bertrand russell Therefore, unless we are willing to give free will to the protozoon we must not give it to man. This, however, is possible, but it is difficult to imagine. If, as seems to me probable, protoplasm only came together in the ordinary course of nature without any special Providence from God, then we and all animals are simply kept going by chemical forces and are nothing more wonderful than a tree (which no one pretends has free will), and if we had a good enough knowledge of the forces acting on any one at any time, the motives pro and con, the constitution of his brain at any time, then we could tell exactly what he would do.’ Until the age of eighteen I continued to believe in a Deist’s God, because the First-Cause argument seemed to me irrefutable. Then in John Stuart Mill’s Autobiography I found that James Mill had taught him the refutation of that argument—namely, that it gives no answer to the question ‘Who made God?’ It is curious that Mill should have had so much influence on me, for he was my father’s and mother’s close friend and the source of many of their opinions, but I did not know this until a much later date. Without being aware that I was following in my father’s footsteps, I read, before I went to Cambridge, Mill’s Logic and Political Economy, and made elaborate notes in which I practised the art of expressing the gist of each paragraph in a single sentence. I was already interested in the principles of mathematics, and was profoundly dissatisfied with his assimilation of pure mathematics to empirical science—a view which is now universally abandoned. Throughout adolescence I read widely, but as I depended mainly on my grandfather’s library few of the books I read belonged to my own time. They were a curious collection. I remember, as having been important to me, Milman’s History of Christianity, Gibbon, Comte, Dante, Machiavelli, Swift, and Carlyle; but above all Shelley—whom, however, though born in the same month as my grandfather, I did not find on his shelves. It was only at Cambridge that I became aware of the modern world—I mean the world that was modern in the early ’nineties: Ibsen and Shaw, Flaubert and Pater, Walt Whitman, Nietzsche, etc. But I do not think any of these men had much influence on me, with the possible exception of Ibsen. The men who changed my opinions at that time were two: first McTaggart in one direction, and then, after I had become a Fellow, G. E. Moore in the opposite direction. McTaggart made me a Hegelian, and Moore caused me to revert to the opinions I had had before I went to Cambridge. Most of what I learnt at Cambridge had to be painfully unlearnt later; on the whole, what I had learnt for myself from being left alone in an old library had proved more solid. The influence of German idealism in England has never gone much beyond the universities, but in them, when I was young, it was almost completely dominant. Green and Caird converted Oxford, and Bradley and my religious reminiscences 5 Bosanquet—the leading British philosophers in the ’nineties—were more in agreement with Hegel than with anyone else, though, for some reason unknown to me, they hardly ever mentioned him. In Cambridge Henry Sidgwick still represented the Benthamite tradition, and James Ward was a Kantian; but the younger men—Stout, Mackenzie, and McTaggart—were, in varying degrees, Hegelians. Very different attitudes towards Christian dogma were compatible with acceptance of Hegel. In his philosophy nothing is held to be quite true, and nothing quite false; what can be uttered has only a limited truth, and, since men must talk, we cannot blame them for not speaking the whole truth and nothing but the truth. The best we can do, according to Bradley, is to say things that are ‘not intellectually corrigible’—further progress is only possible through a synthesis of thought and feeling, which, when achieved, will lead to our saying nothing. Ideas have degrees of truth, greater or less according to the stage at which they come in the dialectic. God has a good deal of truth, since He comes rather late in the dialectic; but He has not complete truth, since He is swallowed up in the Absolute Idea. The right wing among Hegelians emphasized the truth in the concept of God, the left wing the falsehood, and each wing was true to the Master. A German Hegelian, if he was taking orders, remembered how much truer the concept of God is than, e.g. that of gods; if he was becoming a civil servant, he remembered the even greater truth of the Absolute Idea, whose earthly copy was the Prussian State. In England teachers of philosophy who were Hegelians almost all belonged to the left wing. ‘Religion’, says Bradley, ‘is practical, and therefore still is dominated by the idea of the Good; and in the essence of this idea is contained an unsolved contradiction. Religion is still forced to maintain unreduced aspects, which, as such, cannot be united; and it exists, in short, by a kind of perpetual oscillation and compromise.’ Neither Bradley nor Bosanquet believed in personal immortality. Mackenzie, while I was reading philosophy, stated in a paper which I heard that ‘a personal God is, in a sense, a contradiction in terms’: he was subsequently one of my examiners. The attitude of these men to religion was thus not one of which the orthodox could approve, but it was by no means one of hostility: they held religion to be an essential ingredient in the truth, and defective only when taken as the whole truth. The sort of view that I had previously held, ‘either there is a God or there is not, and probably the latter’, seemed to them very crude; the correct opinion, they would say, was that from one point of view there is a God and from another there is not, but from the highest point of view there neither is nor is not. Being myself naturally ‘crude’, I never succeeded in reaching this pitch of mellowness. McTaggart, who dominated the philosophical outlook of my generation at Cambridge, was peculiar among Hegelians in various ways. He was more 6 the basic writings of bertrand russell faithful than the others to the dialectic method, and would defend even its details. Unlike some of the school, he was definite in asserting certain things and denying others; he called himself an Atheist, but firmly believed in personal immortality, of which he was convinced that he possessed a logical demonstration. He was four years senior to me, and in my first term was President of the Union. He and I were both so shy that when, about a fortnight after I came up, he called on me, he had not the courage to come in and I had not the courage to ask him in, so that he remained in the doorway about five minutes. Soon, however, the conversation got on to philosophy, and his shyness ceased. I found that all I had thought about ethics and logic and metaphysics was considered to be refuted by an abstruse technique that completely baffled me; and by this same technique it was to be proved that I should live for ever. I found that the old thought this nonsense, but the young thought it good sense, so I determined to study it sympathetically, and for a time I more or less believed it. So, for a short time, did G. E. Moore. But he found the Hegelian philosophy inapplicable to chairs and tables, and I found it inapplicable to mathematics; so with his help I climbed out of it, and back to common sense tempered by mathematical logic. The intellectual temper of the ’nineties was very different from that of my father’s youth: in some ways better, but in many ways worse. There was no longer, among the abler young men, any preoccupation with the details of the Christian faith; they were almost all Agnostics, and not interested in discussions as to the divinity of Christ, or in the details of Biblical criticism. I remember a feeling of contempt when I learned that Henry Sidgwick as a young man, being desirous of knowing whether God exists, thought it necessary, as a first step, to learn Semitic languages, which seemed to me to show an insufficient sense of logical relevance. But I was willing, as were most of my friends, to listen to a metaphysical argument for or against God or immortality or free will; and it was only after acquiring a new logic that I ceased to think such arguments worth examining. The non-academic heroes of the ’nineties—Ibsen, Strindberg, Nietzsche, and (for a time) Oscar Wilde—differed very greatly from those of the previous generation. The great men of the ’sixties were all ‘good’ men: they were patient, painstaking, in favour of change only when a detailed and careful investigation had persuaded them that it was necessary in some particular respect. They advocated reforms, and in general their advocacy was successful, so that the world improved very fast; but their temper was not that of rebels. I do not mean that no great rebels existed; Marx and Dostoievsky, to mention only two, did most of their best work in the ’sixties. But these men were almost unknown among cultured people in their own day, and their influence belongs to a much later date. The men who commanded respect in England in the ’sixties—Darwin, Huxley, Newman, the authors of Essays and my religious reminiscences 7 Reviews, etc.—were not fundamentally at war with society; they could meet, as they did in the ‘Metaphysical Society’, to discuss urbanely whether there is a God. At the end they divided; and Sir Mountstuart Grant Duff, on being asked afterwards whether there is a God, replied: ‘Yes, we had a very good majority.’ In those days democracy ruled even over Heaven. But in the ’nineties young men desired something more sweeping and passionate, more bold and less bland. The impulse towards destruction and violence which has swept over the world began in the sphere of literature. Ibsen, Strindberg, and Nietzsche were angry men—not primarily angry about this or that, but just angry. And so they each found an outlook on life that justified anger. The young admired their passion, and found in it an outlet for their own feelings of revolt against parental authority. The assertion of freedom seemed sufficiently noble to justify violence; the violence duly ensued, but freedom was lost in the process. (The Rationalist Annual, 1938, published by C. A. Watts & Co., Ltd.)