

BERTRAND RUSSELL AGAINST CHRISTIANITY, FOR HUMANISM

A TALK BY JOE SAMPSON TO THE ATHEIST SOCIETY AT THE MELBOURNE UNITARIAN CHURCH 13 DECEMBER 2022

INTRODUCTION

The thinker whose views I will discuss is philosopher and mathematician and outspoken critic of religion, Bertrand Russell, as outlined in his essays “Why I Am Not A Christian” and “The Faith of A Rationalist” (subsequently published as “The Faith of A Humanist”).

Russell was brought up a Christian but rejected Christianity in his teens because he found the arguments for God’s existence unconvincing and because he said that he could not disprove God’s existence called himself an agnostic. He replaced his Christian world view with a Humanist world view. He was a member of the Advisory Council of the British Humanist Association.

In his autobiography he recounted his experience in prison in 1918, where he was sentenced for writing an article for an anti-conscription newspaper in which he said that American soldiers would be used as strike-breakers in England, and he wrote: "I was much cheered on my arrival by the warden at the gate, who had to take particulars about me. He asked my religion, and I replied 'agnostic.' He asked how to spell it, and remarked with a sigh, 'Well, there are many religions, but I suppose they all worship the same God.' This remark kept me cheerful for about a week."

WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN

INTRODUCTION

The lecture “Why I Am Not A Christian” was delivered on March 6, 1927, to the National Secular Society in Battersea, London, England. In the lecture first Russell said that he would say what the word ‘Christian’ means.

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN?

Russell said that are two defining characteristics of the term ‘Christian’. First you must believe in God and immortality. Secondly, you must believe that Christ was, if not divine, at least the best and wisest human. Russell said that therefore when he tells you why he is not a Christian, he has to tell you why he does not believe in God and immortality and why he does not think that Christ was the best and wisest of men, although Russell granted him a very high degree of moral goodness. Russell said that in

the past to be a Christian one had to believe in hell but nowadays not all Christians believe in hell.

THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Russell said that the Catholic Church claims that the existence of God can be proved by unaided reason. The Church set out a number of these arguments to prove this. Russell said that there are a number of these arguments but he will discuss only a few.

THE FIRST CAUSE ARGUMENT

The First Cause argument says that everything we see in this world has a cause and as you back in the chain of causes you must come to a stop at a First Cause and that First Cause is God. Russell says that if everything has a cause, then God must have a cause, and hence there is not a First Cause. Russell says if there can be any thing without a cause it may just as well be the Universe as God. Russell says that there is no reason that the world could not have come into being without a cause; nor is there any reason why it could not have always existed. Russell says that the idea that things must have a beginning is due to the poverty of our imagination.

THE NATURAL LAW ARGUMENT

The natural law argument is that the laws of nature imply a lawgiver, i.e. God. Russell says that such an argument is due to a confusion between natural and human laws. Russell says that human laws are behests commanding you to behave in a certain way, in which way you may choose to behave or not choose to behave; but natural laws are a description of how things do behave.

THE ARGUMENT FROM DESIGN

The argument from design is that everything in the world is made just so that we can manage to live in it, and if the world was ever so little different we could not manage to live in it. Russell says that since the time of Darwin we understand much better why living creatures are adapted to their environment. It is not that their environment was made to be suitable to them, but that they grew to be suitable to it, and that is the basis of adaptation. There is no evidence of design about it.

Russell said that he finds it astonishing that people can believe that this world, with all its defects, is the best that omnipotence and omniscience can produce in millions of years. Russell said that he cannot believe that were he granted omniscience and omnipotence and millions of years to perfect the world that he could do nothing better than produce the Ku Klux Klan and Fascists. Moreover, he says, the scientific evidence is that life on earth will eventually die out.

THE MORAL ARGUMENT FOR DEITY

This argument was invented by the philosopher Kant. It says that there would be no right or wrong unless God existed. Russell said that if you are sure that there is a difference between right or wrong then is the difference due to God's fiat (i.e. command) or is it not? If it is due to God's command, then for God there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good. Russell says that if you are going to say, as theologians do, that God is good, you must then say that right and wrong have some meaning which is independent of God's fiat, because God's fiats are good independently of the mere fact that He made them. Russell says that if you are going to say that, you will then have to say that they are in essence logically anterior to God.

THE ARGUMENT FOR THE REMEDYING OF INJUSTICE

Russell says that this argument says that the existence of God is necessary to bring justice to the world. The argument says that sometimes the good suffer and the wicked prosper but if there is to be justice in the long run there must be a future life presided over by God in which there is a Heaven and Hell. Russell says that from a scientific point of view one would say that one knows only this world and not the rest of the Universe but probably this world is a fair sample, and if there is injustice here the odds are that there is injustice somewhere else and that is a moral argument against deity.

SUMMARY OF THE ARGUMENT'S FOR GOD'S EXISTENCE

Russell says that the intellectual arguments that he discussed are not why most people believe in God; he says that the reason that most people believe in God is because they have been taught from early infancy to do it. He says that the next most powerful reason is a wish for safety, a feeling that there is a big brother who will look after you.

THE CHARACTER OF CHRIST

Russell then went on to discuss whether Christ was the best and wisest person ever. Russell says that while it is generally taken for granted that Christ was the best and wisest person Russell did not agree.

GOOD MAXIMS IN CHRIST'S TEACHING

Russell said that there are many points upon which he agreed with Christ; a great deal more than the professing Christians do. Russell says that Christ said: "Do not resist the one who is evil. But if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." I myself do not understand why Russell and Christ think that this is a good idea; I cannot see that it is wise to give in to such aggression.

Russell said that there is another point which he considered to be excellent, Christ's saying : ""Do not judge, or you too will be judged."

Russell said that Christ's saying "Give to the one who begs from you, and do not refuse the one who would borrow from you." is a very good principle.

Russell said that there is another maxim of Christ which he thought an excellent one but does not think popular among some Christians: "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor".

Russell said that he thought all these good maxims although difficult to live up to.

DEFECTS IN CHRIST'S TEACHINGS.

Russell said that on certain matters that he did not believe in the superlative wisdom or superior goodness of Christ as depicted in the Gospels; and in saying this he was not concerned with the historical question. Russell said that he is not concerned with whether Christ actually existed – he said that it is doubtful whether Christ existed and if He did we know nothing about Him. Russell was concerned with Christ as he appears in the Gospels.

CHRIST'S LACK OF WISDOM

Russell said that some things about Christ as He appears in the Gospels do not seem to be very wise. Russell said that a great many texts show that He thought His second coming would occur in clouds of glory before the death of all people who were living at that time. For example: "You will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes." Another example is "there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom." Russell says that there are a lot of places where it is clear that Christ believed that His Second Coming would happen during the lifetime of many living. Russell said that was the belief of His earlier followers and was the basis of a great deal of his moral teaching. Russell says that when Jesus said "Don't worry about tomorrow" it was very largely because he thought that the second coming was going to be very soon, and that all ordinary mundane affairs did not count. Russell said that the early Christians did believe that the Second Coming was imminent. On this matter Russell says that is clear that Jesus was not wise.

THE MORAL PROBLEM

Russell then said that he came to the moral questions about Jesus. Russell said that he believed that there is one very serious defect in Christ's moral character and that is that He believed in Hell. Russell said that he did not believe that a humane person can believe in everlasting punishment. Russell said that Christ as depicted in the Gospels did believe in everlasting punishment and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against

those people who would not listen to His preaching. In the Gospels Christ said: "You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to Hell?" Russell said that that was said to people who did not like his preaching. Russell also said that there is a familiar text about the sin against the Holy Ghost: "anyone who speaks against the Holy Ghost will never be forgiven, either in this world or in the world to come." Russell said that this text has caused an unspeakable amount of misery in the world, for all sorts of people have imagined that they committed the sin against the Holy Ghost. Russell said that he did not think that a person with a proper degree of kindness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world. Then Russell says that Christ said "The Son of Man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and those which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire, where there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth." Russell says that Christ goes on about the wailing and gnashing of teeth in one verse after another and that it is quite manifest to the reader that there is a certain pleasure in contemplating wailing and gnashing of teeth or else it would not occur so often. Russell says that Christ spoke about how at the Second Coming when He divides people into the sheep and goats He says to the goats: "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." And Russell says that Christ said: "If your hand offends you, cut it off; it is better for you to enter into life maimed, than having two hands, to go to Hell, into the fire that never will be quenched, where the worm never dies and the fire is not quenched." Russell said that the doctrine of Hell-fire as a punishment for sin is a doctrine of cruelty.

Russell said that Jesus was not very kind to put devils into the Gadarene pigs and make them rush down the hill to the sea. Russell says that as He was omnipotent He could have made the devils go away rather than send them into the pigs.

Russell said that there was also the story of the fig-tree which he found puzzling. Russell said that Jesus was hungry and seeing a fig tree came to it but found nothing but leaves for it was not the time for fruit. So Jesus caused the tree to wither. Russell said that this was a curious story for it was not the right time of year for figs, so you could not blame the tree.

Russell said that he did not believe that in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue that Christ stands as high as some other people in history. Russell said that he put Buddha and Socrates above Him in these respects.

THE EMOTIONAL FACTOR

Russell said that the real reason that people accept religion has nothing to do with argumentation but rather emotional grounds. Russell said that one is often told that it is wrong to attack religion because it makes people virtuous. Russell says that he has not noticed it. Russell said that it is a fact that the more intense has been the religion of any

period and the more profound has been the dogmatic belief, the greater has been the cruelty and the worse has been the state of affairs. Russell said that in the so-called ages of faith, when people really did believe the Christian religion completely there was the Inquisition, with its tortures; there were millions of unfortunate women burnt as witches; and there was every kind of cruelty practised upon all sorts of people in the name of religion.

Russell said that you find as you look round the world that every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step towards the diminution of war, every step towards better treatment of the coloured races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organised Churches of the world. Russell's essay was written in 1927; I do not think that today most Christian churches today are as against progress in these matters as they would have been in 1927.

Russell said that that the Christian religion, as organized in its Churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world. This was said in 1927 before the horrors of Nazism causing the deaths of millions; by 1927 Lenin and Stalin had killed large numbers under Marxism-Leninism and after 1927 millions died under Stalin and also under Mao. I think that political fanaticism in the 20th Century was a far greater enemy of progress than Christianity.; Russell was aware of the violent nature of Marxism-Leninism because he wrote a book highly critical of it entitled "The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism". So I do not agree with Russell that the Christian religion, as organized in its Churches, has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.

HOW THE CHURCHES HAVE RETARDED PROGRESS

Russell said that people may think that he was going too far when he said that that is still so. Russell said that he did not think that he was. Russell said that it is not a pleasant fact, that suppose that an inexperienced girl is married to a syphilitic man, in that case the Catholic Church says: "This is an indissoluble sacrament. You must stay together for life," and no steps of any sort must be taken by that woman to prevent herself from giving birth to syphilitic children. Russell said that that is fiendish cruelty, and nobody whose natural sympathies have not been warped by dogma, or whose moral nature was not absolutely dead to all sense of suffering, could maintain that it is right and proper that that state of things should continue. I find it difficult to believe what Russell said on this matter is true; I feel sure that the Catholic Church would encourage the man to take steps to get rid of his syphilis.

Russell said that here are a great many ways in which the Church, by its insistence upon what it chooses to call morality, inflicts upon all sorts of people undeserved and unnecessary suffering. And, Russell says, it is an opponent of progress and of

improvement in all the ways that diminish suffering in the world, because it has chosen to label as morality a certain narrow set of rules of conduct which have nothing to do with human happiness; and when you say that this or that ought to be done because it would make for human happiness, they think that has nothing to do with the matter at all. "What has human happiness to do with morals? The object of morals is not to make people happy. It is to fit them for Heaven."

FEAR THE FOUNDATION OF RELIGION

Russell said that he thought that religion is based primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown, and partly the wish to feel that one has a kind of elder brother who will stand by one in all your troubles and disputes. Russell said that fear is the basis of the whole thing—fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Russell said that fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand-in-hand. Russell said that in this world we can now begin a little to understand things, and a little to master them by the help of science, which has forced its way step by step against the Christian religion, against the Churches, and against the opposition of all the old precepts. Russell said that Science can help us to get over this craven fear in which humanity has lived for so many generations. Russell said that Science can teach us, and that our own hearts can teach us, no longer to look round for imaginary supports, no longer to invent allies in the sky, but rather to look to our own efforts here below to make this world a fit place to live in, instead of the sort of place that the Churches in all these centuries have made it.

SUMMARY

Russell found the arguments for God's existence unconvincing. He said that he could not disprove God's existence and called himself an agnostic. He said that though there is much to admire in Christ's teachings that he did not feel that either in the matter of wisdom or in the matter of virtue Christ stands quite as high as some other people known to history.

FAITH OF A HUMANIST (FAITH OF A RATIONALIST)

INTRODUCTION

The essay "The Faith Of A Rationalist" was originally given as a talk on radio on May 20 1947. It was printed as a Rationalist Press Association pamphlet. It was printed as an essay entitled "The Faith Of A Humanist" in the book "Humanist Anthology", edited by Margaret Knight.

Russell said that when he tried to discover what are the original sources of his opinions, both practical and theoretical, he found that most of them sprang ultimately from

admiration for two qualities - kindly feeling and veracity. Russell said that to begin with kindly feeling: most of the social and political evils of the world arise through absence of sympathy and presence of hatred, envy, or fear. He said that hostile feelings of this sort are common between nations; at many times they have existed between different classes or different creeds within one nation; in many professions envy is an obstacle to the recognition of superior merit; hatred of Jews, oppression of Negroes, contempt for all who are not white, have brought and are bringing great suffering to would be oppressors as well as to those whom they have sought to oppress. Russell said that every kind of hostile action or feeling provokes a reaction by which it is increased and so generates a progeny of violence and injustice which has a terrible vitality. He said that this can only be met by cultivating in ourselves and attempting to generate in the young feelings of friendliness rather than hostility, of well-wishing rather than malevolence, and of cooperation rather than competition.

VERACITY AND KINDLY FEELING

Russell said that if asked "Why do you believe this?" he did not appeal to any supernatural authority, but only to the general wish for happiness. Russell said that a world full of hate is a world full of sorrow; each party, where there is mutual hatred, hopes that only the other party will suffer, but this is seldom the case. Russell said that even the most successful oppressors are filled with fear - slave owners, for example, have been obsessed with dread of a servile insurrection. Russell said that from the point of view of worldly wisdom, hostile feeling and limitation of sympathy are folly. He said that their fruits are war, death, oppression, and torture, not only for their original victims but, in the long run, also for their perpetrators or their descendants. Russell said that if we could all learn to love our neighbours the world would quickly become a paradise for us all. He said that that veracity, which he regarded as second only to kindly feeling, consists broadly in believing according to evidence and not because a belief is comfortable or a source of pleasure. He said that in the absence of veracity, kindly feeling will often be defeated by self-deception. He said that it used to be common for the rich to maintain either that it is pleasant to be poor or that poverty is the result of shiftlessness. He said that some healthy people maintain that all illness is self-indulgence. Russell said that he had heard fox-hunters argue that the fox likes being hunted. Russell said that it is very easy for those who have exceptional power to persuade themselves that the system by which they profit gives more happiness to the under-dog than he or she would enjoy under a more just system. And, he said, even where no obvious bias is involved, it is only by means of veracity that we can acquire the scientific knowledge required to bring about our common purposes. Russell said that many cherished prejudices had to be abandoned in the development of modern medicine and hygiene. Russell then said: "How many wars would have been prevented

if the side which was ultimately defeated had formed a just estimate of its prospects instead of one based on conceit and wish-fulfilment!"

BELIEVING WITHOUT PROOF

Russell said that veracity, or love of truth, is defined by Locke as "not entertaining any proposition with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon will warrant." Russell said that this definition is admirable in regard to all those matters as to which proof may reasonably be demanded. But, Russell says, since proofs need premises, it is impossible to prove anything unless some things are accepted without proof. Russell says that what is reasonable to believe without proof are the facts of sense-experience and the principles of mathematics and logic—including the inductive logic employed in science. Russell says that these are things which we can hardly bring ourselves to doubt and as to which there is a large measure of agreement among humans. But, says Russell, in matters as to which people disagree, or as to which our own convictions are wavering, we should look for proofs, or, if proofs cannot be found, we should be content to confess ignorance. Russell says that there are some who hold that veracity should have limitations; some beliefs, they say, are both comforting and morally beneficial, although it cannot be said that there are valid scientific grounds for supposing them to be true; these beliefs, they say, should not be critically examined. Russell said that he cannot admit any such doctrine and cannot believe that humanity can be the better for shrinking from the examination of this or that question. Russell says that no sound morality can need to be based upon evasion, and a happiness derived from beliefs not justified on any ground except their pleasantness is not a kind of happiness that can be unreservedly admired.

RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AND THE UNIVERSE

Russell said that these considerations apply especially to religious beliefs. Russell said that most of us have been brought up to believe that the universe owes its existence to an all-wise and all-powerful Creator, whose purposes are beneficent even in what to us may seem evil. Russell said that it is not right to refuse to apply to this belief the kind of tests that we should apply to one that touches our emotions less intimately and profoundly. Russell said that there is no evidence that the belief is true; Russell gave his reasons for disbelief in God in the previous essay "Why I Am Not A Christian". Russell said that the belief lost whatever rationality it once possessed when it was discovered that the earth is not the centre of the universe. Russell said that so long as it was thought that the sun and the planets and the stars revolved about the earth, it was natural to suppose that the universe had a purpose connected with the earth, and, since humanity was what humanity most admired on the earth, this purpose was supposed to be embodied in humanity. But, said Russell, astronomy and geology have changed all this: the earth is a minor planet of a minor star which is one of many millions of stars in a galaxy which is one of many millions of galaxies.; even within the life of our own planet

the human race is only a brief interlude; non-human life existed for countless ages before humanity was evolved. Russell said that humankind, even if it does not commit scientific suicide, will perish ultimately through failure of water or air or warmth. Russell said that it is difficult to believe that Omnipotence needed so vast a setting for so small and transitory a result and that apart from the minuteness and brevity of the human species, it is not a worthy climax to such an enormous prelude. Russell said that there is a rather repulsive smugness and self-complacency in the argument that humanity is so splendid as to be evidence of infinite wisdom and infinite power in their Creator. Russell said that those who use this kind of reasoning always try to concentrate our attention on the few saints and sages; they try to make us forget the Neros and Attilas and Hitlers and the millions of mean poltroons to whom such people owed their power. And, Russell said, even what is best in us is apt to lead to disaster. Russell said that religions that teach brotherly love have been used as an excuse for persecution, and our profoundest scientific insight is made into a means of mass destruction. Russell said that he can imagine a sardonic demon producing humanity for his amusement, but Russell cannot attribute to a Being who is wise, beneficent, and omnipotent the terrible weight of cruelty, suffering, and ironic degradation of what is best that has marred the history of humanity in increasing measure as humanity has become more in charge of its fate.

A PLAUSIBLE CONJECTURE

Russell said that there is a different and vaguer conception of cosmic Purpose as not omnipotent but slowly working its way through a recalcitrant material. Russell said that this is a more plausible conception of a God who, though omnipotent and loving, has deliberately produced beings so subject to suffering and cruelty as the majority of humankind. Russell said that no one can adduce any good evidence that cosmic processes have any purpose whatever with our very inadequate evidence, so far as it goes, tending in the opposite direction, seeming to show that energy is being more and more evenly distributed, while everything to which it is possible to attribute value depends upon uneven distribution and in the end, therefore, we should expect a dull uniformity, in which the universe would continue for ever and ever without the occurrence of anything in the slightest degree interesting. Russell said that immortality, if we could believe in it, would enable us to shake off this gloom about the physical world and then we could say that although our souls, during their sojourn here on earth, are in bondage to matter and physical laws, they pass at death into an eternal world beyond the empire of decay which science seems to reveal in the sensible world. But, says Russell, it is impossible to believe this unless we think that a human being consists of two parts—soul and body—which are separable and can continue independently of each other, with all the evidence is against this. Russell says that the mind grows like the body; like the body it inherits characteristics from both parents; it is affected by diseases of the body and by drugs; it is intimately connected with the brain, with no scientific reason to suppose that after death the mind or soul acquires an independence

of the brain which it never had in life. Russell said that he does not pretend that this argument is conclusive, but it is all that we have to go upon except the slender evidence supplied by psychical research.

HAPPINESS THROUGH KINDNESS

Russell said that many people fear that, without the theoretical beliefs that he found compelled to reject, the ethical beliefs which he accepted could not survive, with such people pointing to the growth of cruel systems opposed to Christianity. But, said Russell, these systems, which grew up in a Christian atmosphere, could never have grown up if either kindly feeling or veracity had been practised; he said that they are evil myths, inspired by hate and without scientific support. Russell said that people tend to have the beliefs that suit their passion: cruel people believe in a cruel God and use their belief to excuse their cruelty, with only kindly people believing in a kindly God, and they would be kindly in any case. Russell said that the reasons for the ethic that, in common with many whose beliefs are more orthodox, he wished to see prevail are reasons derived from the course of events in this world. Russell said that we have seen a great system of cruel falsehood, the Nazi system, lead a nation to disaster at immense cost to its opponents., and that it is not by such systems that happiness is to be achieved; even without the help of revelation it is not difficult to see that human welfare requires a less ferocious ethic. Russell said that more and more people are becoming unable to accept traditional beliefs, and if they think that, apart from these beliefs, there is no reason for kindly behaviour the results may be needlessly unfortunate. Russell said that that is why it is important to show that no supernatural reasons are needed to make people kind and to prove that only through kindness can the human race achieve happiness

SUMMARY

I have discussed why Russell rejected the Christianity that he was brought up in and why he replaced the Christian world view with the Humanist world view.

MAIN REFERENCES

Russell, B.R. The Faith of A Rationalist (The Faith of A Humanist)

Russell, B. R. Why I Am Not A Christian

The above two essays are available at this link

[Microsoft Word - B Russell Why I am not PR 001.doc \(wordpress.com\)](#)

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