

Bertrand Russell's Why I Am Not a Christian

-A Response

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C.S. Lewis, in his work, A Grief Observed, writes, “Heaven will solve our problems, but not, I think, by showing us subtle reconciliations between all our apparently contradictory notions. The notions will all be knocked from under our feet. We shall see that there never was any problem.”¹ When facing the question of whether or not there is a God, and if so, what does that mean for mankind, can the answer really be that simple? For quandaries such as this, and in the face of skepticism, “waiting for heaven” might not suffice for a solution. Perhaps a number of of the problems that some people have in relation to the existence of God truly do lie within their own notions of how this world was formed, or how life and creation are sustained, but for many Lewis’ answer requires far too much faith, and far too little reality.

For there to be a definitive answer, there is a logical requirement that there be a pre-existing problem. As for noted author and philosopher Bertrand Russell, the problem seems to be easily defined with one word: religion. Seemingly never at a loss for words or desire to defend his positions, Russell has left us with a wealth of essays and information, including a collection of his essays, entitled, Why I Am Not a Christian, written to correct what he thinks is the misguided seeking of religious men. Quite simply he surmises that there is no need to believe that any religion is true, and most certainly “heaven” will not solve our problems. On the contrary, he seems to think that this faith in heaven only causes more problems.

¹ Lewis, C.S. A Grief Observed, 83

Before going any further, I want to make it clear that I am undeniably and unashamedly a follower of Jesus Christ, my Lord. With that being said, though, as hard as I tried to categorize Bertrand

Russell as a fool and a representative of the absurd, I just could not do it. I certainly would not stand and affirm the truth of his claims in their entirety; nonetheless he makes some interesting points. With this in mind, I would not classify him as a “friend of the faith”, but rather, as a useful critic to aid in the examination, strengthening, and sustaining of our Christian faith.

In an effort to better illustrate his apologies of atheism, I would like to take a closer examination of a two part editorial written by Russell and published in the Stockholm newspaper, *Dagens Nyheter*, in 1954, entitled, “Can Religion Cure Our Troubles?” Never one for optimism, he begins, “Mankind is in mortal peril, and fear now, as in the past, is inclining men to seek refuge in God.”² Immediately, one can see the background logic that underlies Russell’s thinking. In his opinion, in times both past and present, men seek God out of fear alone. This assertion seems to dismiss the testimonies of those men and women, like C.S. Lewis, who claim to have been converted by the joy found in God. If fear is the only road to God, how can one account for those who claim, not merely to serve or even worship God, but to actually be enraptured with love and adoration, as illustrated in the Christian metaphor of “the bride of Christ”. This Biblical thought of Christ as a lover of his bride surely cannot be born of fear. Rather, it seems to be indicative of love, which stands in opposition to fear. This is not to say that Russell’s point should be dismissed, though. Can we as Christians deny our tendency to prey on the fears of those who are not of the faith? I could not possibly count the number of times that I have heard youth pastors use phrases such as, “What if your bus crashes on the way home from camp?”, or “If at this moment you are having doubts you might not really be saved”, or describe in vivid detail the pains and horrors of hell, all in an effort to preempt the invitation at the end of a worship service. In many Christian-circles we generally dismiss such tactics as appropriate means employed in an effort to “save some”³, but indeed we do use fear in much of our evangelism. And why not? Even Russell admits its

² Russell, Bertrand. Why I Am Not a Christian, 193

³ New American Standard Version Bible, 1 Corinthians 9:22

effectiveness, but does that translate to the goodness of that approach? We will return to this question in a moment.

The main argument that Russell sets out to combat is the popular notion of the day (and perhaps equally as popular among evangelicals today), “that if the world returned to Christianity, our worldwide problems would be solved.” He wrote further, “I believe this to be a complete delusion born of terror. And I think this to be a dangerous delusion because it misleads men whose thinking might otherwise be fruitful and thus stands in the way of a valid solution.”⁴ Though these thoughts were penned in a different era in history, and arguably they were written of a different world, still they are no less important in our world today. We live in a time where wars are inevitable and always around the corner. In the face of terrorism worldwide and weapons, the likes of which no one in history has ever seen, people are crying out for an answer. On this point, I must agree with Russell. For example, on November 26, 2001, Barna Research Group released some figures on Americans’ religious feelings after September 11th. “Not surprisingly, there was a significant upturn in people's concern about the future. In August of that year, 73% of adults said they were concerned about the future; by November, that figure had increased to 82%.”⁵ According to Barna, immediately following the attacks, this concern for the future manifested itself in increased church attendance and exploration of different areas of faith and religion. The lasting effects of this increased religious interest is still uncertain, but the point seems justified, that fear causes humans to seek God. But I cannot as easily concede that such seeking is not a valid solution. I do not think that we can dismiss the benefits of seeking God on account of questionable reasons for such searching. Let us, therefore, look further into what Russell has to say, examine his arguments, and find if we can logically deduce that hope justifiably can be found in God, or if religion is merely an empty answer to an unanswerable question.

⁴ Russell. 193

⁵ Barna Research Group. “How America’s Faith Has Changed Since 9-11” (November 26, 2001)

What one might call his *experiment* is quite simple. He seeks to answer the question of whether or not societies can practice “a sufficient modicum of morality if they are not helped by dogmatic religion.”⁶ He begins with the two divisions of moral rules: that there are those, which have no basis except in a religious creed; and those, which have an obvious social utility.⁷ Let us begin with religious-morality. He writes “that some very important virtues are more likely to be found among those who reject religious dogmas than those who accept them...especially to the virtue of truthfulness or intellectual integrity.”⁸ A scathing indictment to be sure, but is it accurate? In many ways Christians are under a microscope. For example, instances of pedophilia are always detestable in our society, but how much louder a public and media outcry when it involves a Catholic priest or a Baptist pastor. Why not? As professing Christians we make claims of morality, so perhaps it is simply more noticeable when we act contrary to our claims than it is when a person outside of a faith in God acts immorally. As for intellectual integrity, Russell defines it as “the habit of deciding vexed questions in accordance with the evidence, or of leaving them undecided where the evidence is inconclusive.”⁹ Isn't it possible that in a zealous attempt to claim all things under the Lordship of Christ that many of us have overstepped the bounds of our limited knowledge? As an example, we can use the many hundreds of Christians throughout history who have made claims of knowing the date of Christ's Second Coming, only to be thus far disproved. In reality, scripture gives signs of His coming, but there are no dates or specific times. Any attempt to pinpoint a time with any accuracy is only guesswork. Why have seemingly so few been willing to swallow their pride in the face of uncertainty and concede that they do not know the answer to the question, and withheld final judgment on the issue until further evidence might be found?

⁶ Russell, 194

⁷ Russell, 194

⁸ Russell, 194

⁹ Russell, 194

The remainder of his arguments center on the latter of his division of morality, what we will call “societal-morality”. This type of morality exists out of a mutual desire on the part of citizens within a culture to live prosperous lives. This can be undermined, however, by a vice like theft. Obviously, a society where every person steals is disruptive for everyone. The ideal environment would be a community in which everyone was honest except one’s self. This inherent egocentrism, if left unhindered, would lead to chaos. Hence, the solution is found in social institutions that keep humans in check. These institutions are necessary “if the interest of the individual is to be reconciled with that of the community.”¹⁰ In Russell’s view, these institutions generated societal-morality, and this is where organized religion has historically begun. He continues, “If people can be persuaded that there is a God who will punish theft, even when the police fail, it would seem likely that this belief would promote honesty.” He adds further, “Given a population that already believes in God, it will readily believe that God has prohibited theft.”¹¹ Unashamedly, Russell denigrates the role of religion as a mere carbon copy of preexisting ideals placed under the heading of all-knowing God. Obviously earthly judges cannot catch and punish every immoral act, but an omniscient God can see and punish all wrongful acts, if not now, then surely in the eternal realm. This assumed-Deity forces those who wish to serve their own purposes that are contrary to the good of the society into submission to an ultimate authority, which in the end amounts only to their own fears.

Russell does not completely discount the validity or effectiveness of this strategy in the past, because it undoubtedly led to conduct that was beneficial to the society at large. In the long run, though, he believes the effects of such thinking are detrimental. “Now”, he says, “such good as may be done by imputing theological origin to morals is inextricably bound up with such grave evils that the good

¹⁰ Russell, 195

¹¹ Russell, 195

becomes insignificant in comparison.”¹² You see, in his opinion, God’s hold upon people’s moral lives has been loosened. No longer are people concerned primarily with heavenly retribution, they are far more afraid of earthly punishment, as if “Hell is neither so certain nor so hot as it used to be.”¹³ Perhaps this stems from the rise of governments and legal systems, which gives the appearance of retribution for wrongs, and thereby leaving no need for a Heavenly judge. Perhaps it is equally the fault of Christians, who have so abused the doctrine of salvation-by-grace that God has been reduced to a powerless, kindly-old-grandfather, incapable of wrath or vengeance, and always waiting for his children to come back to him. This emptying of God’s supremacy has seemingly turned the Almighty from being the gracious father of the prodigal son who rejoices at his child’s returning to the family, and more into an old man gravelling at the feet of his wayward son, begging him to grace the family with his presence. For whatever reason, I would have to agree that the cross is continually being emptied of its power, while through advancements of all kinds, this present world’s power is being strengthened with every passing year.

This leads to a common defense employed by many Christians when faced with the prospect of defending their faith. One might conclude that surely Christianity does no harm, regardless of any lack of good that it produces. Russell says that the problem is, “that as soon as men incline to doubt received theology it comes to be supported by odious and harmful means.”¹⁴ What he means by this is, historically, Christians will not let “sleeping dogs lie”. Christianity, by its evangelical nature will adopt numerous methods in order to persuade those who do not believe. Consequently, “the young must be preserved from hearing the arguments...which the authorities dislike.”¹⁵ This censorship of opposing ideas leads to generations of Christians reared inside a proverbial bubble, unable to intelligently respond

¹² Russell, 195

¹³ Russell, 195

¹⁴ Russell, 196

¹⁵ Russell, 196

to arguments made against their faith. Russell concedes that religion when believed on the basis of its truthfulness is understandably defended, and even adds that such defense is respectable, but he “can only feel profound moral reprobation for those who say that religion ought to be believed because it is useful, and that to ask whether it is true is a waste of time.”¹⁶ He is here attacking those Christians who evangelize only on the basis of Christianity’s benefits towards humanity and not on its truth-merits.

It is with great sadness that I am forced by the bounds of logic to agree with Russell. This forces me, as a Christian man seeking to further both my intellectual and spiritual development, to face the fact that in many ways our Christian culture conditions followers of Christ to “just believe” when in the face of doubt or controversy. This has led far too many people into a neglect of actual truth, and into a blind obedience to a faith that they have no training in or any interest in pursuing further. It seems that it is far easier to follow a faith without questioning it than to diligently seek after truth.

The culmination of Russell’s first article is the comparing of Christianity with Communism. I know, in a Christian society, where historically church attendance has been the norm, and especially at Dallas Baptist University, where Christianity is heralded to be the greatest of all goods, such a claim is absurd, but I would submit that his argument has some merit. As he puts it, Christian apologists would like to “regard Communism as something very different from Christianity...(but) The evils of Communism are the same as those that existed in Christianity during the Ages of Faith.”¹⁷ How so, one might ask? Through cruelties, damage to intellectual and moral life, and the falsifying of history, Christians have historically, in Russell’s view, engaged in activities that are no less evil than the grave evils of Communism that Christians have touted so boldly. “The Communist, like the Christian, believes that his doctrine is essential to salvation, and it is this belief which makes salvation possible for

¹⁶ Russell, 197

¹⁷ Russell, 197

him.”¹⁸ Since they are both central to salvation and one’s very existence, they cannot cohabitate. Scientists, according to Russell, are nothing like this. He seems to imply a background logic that is superior to that of the Christian and Communist alike. This scientific-logic suggests humility and a general concession that scientists’ assertions are only theories, and that two scientists can agree to disagree until the appearance of further proof. Once more proof is available, those in scientific circles are inclined to back down and give way to the newly proven truth. Not so among Christendom, though. “When two theologians differ, since there are no criteria to which either can appeal, there is nothing but mutual hatred and an open or covert appeal to force.”¹⁹ In one reductionist-swoop, Russell absolutely dismisses Theology in favor of the more *exact* disciplines that constitute *real* scientific endeavors.

Russell, like many others before and after him, implies that there is nothing truthful or useful in Theology, and it should be viewed as subjective fancy, not suitable for the wise or learned. I will be the first to admit that many a Christian has earned us this reputation, with the over-personalization of God. Simply by our incessant preempting of our every whim with, “God told me...”, or by insisting that ancient texts of scripture spoke new meaning, unseen by anyone except oneself, and therefore must be straight from the lips of God. These ideas, among others, have justifiably tarnished the Christian’s claim of absolute truth and of Theology as a valid science. In his book The Idea of a University, John Henry Newman addresses skeptics of the validity of Theology in this way, “How can we investigate any part of any order of Knowledge, and stop short of that which enters into every order? All true principles run over with it, all phenomena converge to it; it is truly the First and Last.”²⁰ What we are left with is two opposing arguments, but both sides jump to the conclusion that the burden of proof lies within the other. Atheist Kai Nielsen admits, “To show that an argument is invalid or unsound is not to show that the conclusion of the argument is false...All the proofs of God’s existence may fail, but it still may be the

¹⁸ Russell, 198

¹⁹ Russell, 198

case that God exists.”²¹ Paul Copan, a Christian, explains further, “Absence of evidence is not at all the same as evidence of absence, which some atheists fail to see.”²² Neither side, in the absence of verifiable proof, therefore, can dismiss the other.

In the second part of his article, Russell turns his attention to University of Cambridge’s Modern History Professor, Herbert Butterfield. His destroying of Butterfield’s arguments is harsh and thorough, but he ends this section with a summary of Butterfield’s remarks,

It would be a good thing if people loved their neighbors, but they do not show much inclination to do so; Christ said they ought to, and if they believe that Christ was God, they are more likely to pay attention to his teaching on this point than if he were not; therefore, men who wish people to love their neighbors will try to persuade them that Christ was God.²³

Russell’s disgust with Butterfield is that he is a vocal example of the false-dogma that people employ only to add weight to their arguments, all in an effort to cause a desired effect within society. Theology, in other words, is nothing more than the “mere embodiment of superstitious taboos”²⁴ We are once again at a place where we must examine the “selling points” of our faith. Are we pitching a God whose only goal is to cause morality and good behavior among His followers, or are those outward manifestations of morality merely byproducts of a transformed life, resulting from the hope, joy, and love found in our Creator.

So what indeed does the world need? In Russell’s opinion, “What the world needs is reasonableness, tolerance, and a realization of the interdependence of the parts of the human family...and not to return to obscurantist myths.”²⁵ What Russell fails to note, and perhaps to his eternal

²⁰ John Henry Newman. *The Idea of a University*, 29

²¹ Kai Nielsen. *Reason and Practice* (1971), 143-44.

²² Paul Copan. “The Presumptuousness of Atheism” (2003)

²³ Russell, 201

²⁴ Russell, 201

²⁵ Russell, 204

detriment, is that the teachings of Christianity as found in the Bible, a book he dismisses as copied works of un-credited original thinkers, embody these very same principles. What can be more reasonable than the wise teachings found in Proverbs, which herald patience, self-control, morality...etc? As for tolerance, during his ministry on Earth Jesus discriminated against no one. Whether through His kind treatment of the woman at the well, His healing of the sick and disabled, or His prayers of forgiveness for those who were in the act of killing Him, Christ has left us such a clear picture of tolerance for all people. As for the interdependence of the human family, there is no shortage of passages and examples of the value of the family within the kingdom of God. Maybe no greater example is given than that of the church. God instituted his church to rely on one another, and to share in the glory of Christ and of life together.

In conclusion, I find what Russell has to say interesting and thought provoking, and have used his writings as a tool to sharpen my own faith in God. At the same time, I feel remorse for his soul, because it seems to me that in the absence of true Biblical knowledge or a willing heart to seek truth in God, he settled for the oft believed "obscurantist myths" of atheism. I pray that we will step away from Russell's essay, not converted to faithlessness, as he might have desired, but convicted by our own actions that if unchanged might help to produce other such skeptics.