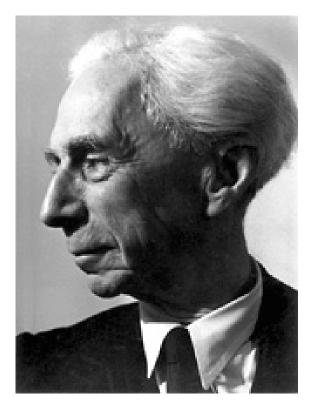
A CHRISTIAN CRITIQUE

Interacting with leading atheist philosophers

"WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN"



A REVIEW OF BERTRAND RUSSELL'S LECTURE (Given on March 6th 1927, at Battersea Town Hall)

"Why I am not a Christian"

A little background

Bertrand Russell died on the 2nd February, 1970, aged 97. He led a long and active life, often controversial in his attachments and commitments, and he has had a profound effect on the way we think about truth. He is famous for his work on mathematics and philosophy, and was a pioneer of 'logical positivism'. He was a man who was certainly consistent in the outworkings of his beliefs - he argued that human beings are not monogamous, opposed the laws against homosexuality (at the time) as well as endorsing sexual relations between unmarried people. He was married four times, and engaged in several extra-marital liaisons, including one with T. S. Eliot's wife Vivien Haigh-Wood. It is perhaps not altogether surprising that Eliot wrote so critically of Russell's famous 1927 public lecture, "Why I am not a Christian".

So why critique what is, after all, a rather old and dated public lecture?

The first reason for this paper is that there has been a resurgence of reprints of such material in recent times. The version I am referring to here was reprinted under Routledge Classics in 2005, and has a preface by Simon Blackburn, dated 2003 - it is very clear that as you read Blackburn's introductory comments, and indeed his attempted refutation of T. S. Eliot's early criticism, that the atheist lobby regard this work as a significant one.

The second reason occurred to me only as read through the lecture, having already become acquainted with the writings of the 'new atheists' such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Dan Dennett. These guys have clearly drunk deeply at the fountain of Bertrand Russell's output - indeed one encounters in their writings most of the ideas expressed in the 1927 lecture, albeit tweaked for a more modern audience. Richard Dawkins' insistence that religion is only perpetuated by beating it into the young minds of children is a direct throwback to Russell who says, "Most people believe in God because they have been taught from infancy to do it, and that is the main reason."

So there is good reason for another look at Russell's keynote speech. Because the 'new atheists' are running out of new ideas, they are increasingly having recourse to the old ones - and you don't get much more trenchant than this example. And because the (flawed) new rhetoric for the new atheism is built upon the (equally flawed) foundations laid by Russell, it surely is time for a fresh look.

And there is a third key reason for Christians to look at "Why I am not a Christian". Many of us have lived in awe of the great philosophers such as Bertrand Russell. Our default behaviour has often been to avoid their writings, on the basis that these are going to be arguments that are too clever for us to engage with. Our fear of these intellectuals probably does not go so far as to suspect that reading their writings might damage our faith - but we certainly pull back from engaging with them on the assumption that we have little to say in response. The reality is quite different. In Russell's case, the brain capable of writing "Principia Mathematica" is a daunting adversary to take on, but as you dig into his writings on faith and spirituality, you suddenly realise that he is just like anyone else. Russell exhibits the same capacity for non-sequiturs, for the substitution of sentiment or prejudice for logic, for fallacious argument as any other protagonist of a keenly-held viewpoint.

Methodology

It is impossible to reference page numbers in this critique - as it is quite likely that readers may not recognise them, depending upon the reprint you may have access to. I have therefore taken steps to attach the complete text of Russell's public lecture, reproduced verbatim, at the rear of these notes. My intention is to reference the relevant sections in my comment, and recommend that readers consult the original text. At the very least you will be able to see that I am not treating Russell as he does the Bible - by wresting verses for mistreatment out of their context, in order to present to us a parody of Christian truth that most of us would rightly reject. You will therefore find my critique following the exact subject headings that appear in the original lecture - hopefully this will help you marry up my comment with the original text. For any thoughtful Christian, our engagement with this kind of material should be an absolute revelation - it opens the door to understanding the thought-world and methodology of the writer, and this in turn lays bare his motivations and intellectual honesty. Enjoy!

What is a Christian?

Russell's comments here reveal quite a specific social context. Note his introductory phrase: "We have to be a little more vague in our meaning of Christianity" - he is writing at a time when the depredations of liberal theology are beginning to exert their maximum critical effect on the public's perception of Christianity. He cannot bring himself to define his subject with the kind of objectivity that we might regard as essential - and so he presents for our delectation a kind of watered-down, minimum requirement version of what it means to be a Christian. Such 'vagueness' is a symptom of cultural conditioning.

There are two things we might say about this. Firstly, that Russell (like all of us) is to an extent a product of his circumstances - it is not his fault that the established Christian church has succumbed to the ravages of higher criticism, and clearly he cannot see into the future when more robust scholarship seeks to undo the damage. It is therefore unfair to judge him too harshly on this point. But, more importantly (and secondly), it is essential to understand that this famous speech of Bertrand Russell's commences with his own, personal, definition of what a Christian is. True Christians, who both know their Bibles, and also have a living experience of Christ will be able to easily unpick Russell's preliminary definition and find it lacking.

And, of course, it is worth pointing out the obvious: this is Russell's *starting point*. If he manages to present us with such a dodgy definition, upon which to base his successive arguments - then we can quite reasonably question the validity of what follows.

The Existence of God

This is a brief section in the original, and merely prefaces Russell's attempt to deal with the various arguments for the existence of God. He starts by accepting that this is "a large and serious question, and if I were to attempt to deal with it in any adequate manner I should have to keep you here until Kingdom Come..." All well and good, but note the mental envelope which frames his consideration - "...the Catholic Church has laid it down as a dogma that the existence of God can be proved by unaided reason." It is clear that his per-

spective is that of the Catholic Church, which presupposes that human reason is adequate to this task on its own. Catholicism has long endorsed the *a priori* beliefs of humanism, namely that the human intellect is free and capable on its own to reason its way to a position of truth - and whilst I appreciate that this is likely to raise as many questions as it solves, this is *not what the Bible teaches*.

It is not central to our consideration here to go off into what is a secondary issue, namely the natural ability of the non-christian mind to reason accurately when it comes to the abiding truths about God. A quick review of world religious views ought to encourage us away from such a belief - and, indeed, the Bible is entirely clear and specific about the matter.

What *is* critical here is Russell's assumption that human reason is enough. It is because of this that he now engages in this brief review of a series of arguments which do, admittedly, often work in two directions at once. And because it is all about unaided human reason, then he considers himself perfectly positioned to trump these arguments - faith in God thereby becomes a casualty of the kinds of sleight of hand that subtle words and rhetoric inflict upon us. Indeed, this is a common theme with the new atheists such as Hitchens - where the clever sound-bite is designed to emasculate a more thoughtful consideration of the subject.

Again, as in the previous section, what is clear is that Russell's target in this address is not that of biblical Christianity. Readers would do well to recognise a straw man when it presented to us at the beginning of this treatment.

The First-Cause Argument

Firstly, let it be said that I've never been entirely persuaded by this argument, and certainly don't think it should be placed central stage. Neverless, it does feel here as if Russell is dispensing just a little to casually with the idea that things or events have causes. Not so long ago, popularist scientific publications were full of concepts such as 'chaos theory' - where seemingly random events in one part of the world have their primary or secondary causes elsewhere. More recently, there have been reputable attempts to establish 'cause' for human behaviour or morbidity within the genome - but of course a working model is never going to be that simplistic. It does seem here as if Russell is falling into the trap of attempting a simplistic demolition of the argument he purports to be addressing - "There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at all".

Is the 'first cause' argument to be disposed of on the basis that there are, in fact, no causes? That would be childish, but Russell's argument is hinting at it here. What, however, is more to the core of the issue is to be found in "If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause." Is this, I wonder, where unaided philosophy gets us? Of course, the Bible states quite clearly that not only was God the 'first cause', but also that he Himself had no cause. The proposition is advanced, not to prove the existence of God, but merely to state the dogmatic nature of the facts. Russell's phrase "everything must have a cause" implies that God is, somehow, made of the same stuff as the universe He created. He is, according to this viewpoint, part of "everything" - and yet biblical revelation makes it quite clear that he is 'other' from created things. He is defined as the creator, rather than as a function or part of the created order. Thus the 'first cause' argument does not entirely succumb to Russell's attack here.

It is not too difficult to anticipate the atheist response to what I have just said - it appears repeatedly in the writings of Dawkins, Hitchens et al. They express varying degrees of protestation against this argument - the statement that "God is" (and therefore has no beginning) is an 'unfair' trump argument. Interestingly, the more convolutedly cerebral members of their fraternity have in recent years attempted a similar kind of solution of their own - the multiverse, or megaverse, or 'landscape' posits a myriad of parallel universes which constantly recycle into each other, thus avoiding the need for *any* kind of first cause (or at least deferring the problem to some remote, invisible point). This, of course, involves a step of faith that makes Christian belief look positively pedestrian in comparison. So, atheists *are* capable of the profoundest leaps of faith, when needs must.

The Natural Law Argument

This is an intriguing section, as it is not at all clear whether Russell is simply engaging in a little humour, simply to keep his audience entertained, rather than seriously engage with the subject. Again, this is not that different to the 'new atheists' who frequently appear to be playing to the gallery (just watch Richard Dawkins addressing the faithful). Sir Isaac Newton's perspective on gravity is dispensed with somewhat frivolously - "That was, of course, a convenient and simple explanation that saved them the trouble of looking any further for explanations of the law of gravitation". So trivially do we toy with past insights.

And indeed, the refutation of these 'natural laws' helps us to ignore that there *are* universal laws (such as gravity), although our understanding of their complexity has altered over the years. Indeed, Russell in his refutation takes us in a direction that I suspect would be shouted down by many modern neo-darwinists - "...the laws at which you arrive are statistical averages of just the sort that would emerge from chance." In fact, he is so smitten by this exact phrase that he repeats it again for emphasis. Having participated in many atheist forums over the years, I can only imagine the howls of outrage that would greet my interpretation of natural selection (the new unquestionable mantra) that life evolved by *chance*. Many new atheists would identify a high degree of determinism within the whole process of the evolution of life, which could not possibly admit to 'chance'. That is to say, they would argue that processes are deterministic and are governed, effectively, by the very natural laws that Russell would deprecate. Just read the sneering reviews of Prof. Stephen Meyer's book "Signature in the cell" on Amazon or on atheist forums if you require further proof.

Russell's approach with the 'natural law argument' is to seek to dig away at it, rather than demolish it entirely. He raises a set of subsidiary quibbles (such as "Why did God issue just those natural laws and no others?"), none of which are conclusive on their own, but when taken in the aggregate *appear* to negate the argument. I would contend that this is dishonest strategy, as the implication is that he is well-aware that each of these little digs are inadequate. Indeed, from a Christian perspective the one just cited in parentheses is just such an argument. *If* God is creator and lawgiver, why should we deny Him the prerogative of establishing only those laws that He wishes to? Why, as created beings, do we think we have the right to suggest *other* laws that we think He should have included in the package? This is somewhat akin to a passenger on a Boeing 747 criticising the designers for not including a nuclear-powered bidet in the washroom (although this might be more capable of refreshing the mind than Russell's rhetoric).

Indeed, Russell's migration towards this kind of bit-by-bit undermining strategy *is* persuasive proof of an underlying intention to deceive, for we have already perceived, via his other writings, that he is cleverer

than that. The critical reader would do well to read this section quite carefully, as it reveals a somewhat fragmentary and intermittent use of logic - wherein the individual elements are far from naturally dependent upon the preceding statements or arguments. We arrive at the astonishing conclusion that "...God Himself was subject to law, and therefore you do not get any advantage by introducing God as an intermediary." One is left wondering, 'Is this really the best that atheists can muster?" Perhaps it is, if one's view of a Creator-God is that he is small and insignificant enough to be entirely susceptible to finite human reason.

To Russell's credit, it may be that he has become so used to dealing with the woolly liberalism of the established church (at that time) that he has become lazy when constructing his arguments - "As we come to modern times, they (intellectual arguments) become less respectable intellectually and more and more affected by a kind of moralising vagueness." What C. H. Spurgeon had described in the late 19th Century as the 'downgrade' of Christian theology had led to an establishment that Russell could play with in this manner, and convince himself that he was winning the argument.

The Argument from Design

As he addresses this issue, Russell says "It is an easy argument to parody". And so he does. After all, it is easy to do.

This section engages in a profound dishonesty with his listeners. His fundamental, underlying principle, is that if something (in the natural world) *looks* designed, then it cannot be. The assumption is that the appearance of design is merely that, an appearance. The argument *against* design presupposes that there cannot be an intelligence behind it: it rests wholly on the *a priori* assumption of naturalism.

There is much we could say about this. We could say that, wherever else we look in the world, if something *looks* designed, then it generally is. We could say that evolutionary theory does not yet provide us with a scientific model of how organisms could evolve in the absolute sense to fit their (many, varied) environments - merely that there is sufficient redundancy in our DNA to allow micro-adaptation to changes. We could say that, at the molecular level, there is profound and convincing evidence of intelligent design (which Russell did not have access to). What we *can* say, without much fear of contradiction, is that Russell's confident assertions are not justified by the state of the science *at that time*. This has been a constant theme with the secularist establishment ever since Darwin - the public have the optimistic assumptions of *future* research foisted on them as *current fact*.

And, we could say that Russell's sneering view of the world ("Do you think that, if you were granted omnipotence and omniscience and millions of years in which to perfect your world, you could produce nothing better than the Ku Klux Klan or the Fascists?") works both ways - given natural selection's pseudointelligent control of organisms' adaptation, plus millions and millions of years, is that the best it can do? Of course my response is as much a non-argument as Russell's - there *are* better things than the Ku Klux Klan or Fascists, and many of them are denied by atheists! And, of course, Russell is neatly sidestepping the Christian contention that the 'best' of this world is far from being what it ought to be, by reason of human sin.

This section highlights Russell's use of unsupported assumptions - that the moon, for instance, is an example of what the earth will end up like (does he believe that the moon once supported life?), and it also lays bare his ultimate nihilism. For his view is that intelligent life is, ultimately, a transient thing. He sees a future

universe where the products of human civilisation lay cold and lifeless with mankind in its permanent grave. But none of this matters, he says, because it will be so far into the future that nobody will care, no-one will worry about it. Business as usual. As long as the buses keep running, that's OK then.

Apparently, none of us will concern ourselves about this. Apparently, the certainty of oblivion will not change our behaviour, and we will carry on regardless. Well, clearly, Russell had not at that stage anticipated Global Warming - this is something which motivates people enormously, regardless of the robustness of the science. Indeed, *belief* in Global Warming is, to all intents and purposes, the new religion of the early 21st Century: disagreeing with the whole concept is becoming the modern equivalent of holocaust-denial.

There is, incidentally, another aspect to this argument. We could contend that Russell's nihilism *has* affected us. We live in an age of greater futility and powerlessness than ever before. An increasing proportion of our western population lives as if there were no real purpose for their lives. The obsession with entertainment and with instant gratification, fed by the mushrooming of personal debt prove that, in a secular world, our response to Russell's pointless existence is to simply ignore the future and pretend that we don't have one. Why, otherwise, would we mortgage our futures for shiny trinkets?

The Moral Arguments for Deity

To my mind this is a relatively brief and insignificant section in the lecture. Certainly, Russell appears to dispense with the issue with brevity and also with quite a bit of ambiguity. At root, this argument is about our perception of 'right and wrong' - is there a difference between the two concepts? Russell keeps his own counsel here, and goes on to consider the basis for discerning between right and wrong - but one is left with the suspicion that, in practice, his solution was to either ignore such minor issues, or alternatively redefine the concepts to suit whatever situation applied at the time.

And *if* there is a difference between right and wrong, then "..is that difference due to God's fiat or not?" At this point, the question forms the pivot between the two worldviews of the atheist and the theist. For the former, *if* there is a difference, then it is of an entirely humanistic or situational nature. For the latter, such concepts are rooted in the very being of a Creator God - and therefore at this juncture, Russell's logic appears to go hopelessly awry: "If it is due to God's fiat, then for God Himself there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good." Why on earth should that be?

How can Russell actually argue that if God defines what is right or wrong, then He Himself must somehow be indifferent to, or independent of the concepts? I suppose that this is only possible if one regards God as a bit like us - a limited being, who decides on a moral issue either by reference to some external benchmark *or* by reference to His own arbitrary preferences at the time. In fact, from a biblical perspective, neither is true. The standards of moral behaviour, which He expects from us, flow out of his own moral nature. If God is, as the Bible posits, an infinite and sovereign being, why should He not erect standards for His creation which reflect His own being - why should not He be the ultimate benchmark? There is a difference between us being *subject* to God's moral laws, and for Him to act consistently with His own moral nature. The issue of morality, in part, flows out of the concept of us, as created beings, bearing the 'image' of God - and the moral laws are a restatement of what it means to share that image.

The Argument for the Remedying of Injustice

It is not easy to discern in this section where Russell's logic is taking him. One has to admit the possibility that it is because his line of reasoning simply escapes me, although it is not inappropriate to interrogate his position when it appears to crystallise into something that is malleable to critique. Hence, towards the end of this (brief) section, Russell begins to wrap up with, "...that is really what a scientific person would argue about the universe. He would say, 'Here we find in this world a great deal of injustice and so far as that goes that is a reason for supposing that justice does not rule in the world; and therefore so far as it goes it affords a moral argument against deity and not in favour of one'."

This is an intriguingly perverse line of argument. He commences with the observation that injustice is wide-spread, and that in fact, justice is *not* the prevailing principle. This in fact is precisely what the Bible tells us about a world where men choose their own versions of 'justice' rather than abiding by God's standards of integrity and uprightness. But rather than conclude that his observation is consistent with the biblical proposition, Russell then apparently turns the argument on its head.

What Russell therefore appears to be saying is that a 'scientific person' would choose to ignore the precise corroboration between the (biblical) data and the real world, and somewhat arbitrarily arrive at an alternative conclusion. He ignores the fact that justice (and indeed injustice) is important to us, and yet despite the priority we *apparently* assign to it, that there is still a predominance of injustice around us. Instead he prefers to resolve the issue, from a religious perspective, in some kind of forlorn hope in an afterlife to remediate the injustice experienced during this life - yet that is not (again) a representation of the Christian hope, where we seek to establish similar standards of uprightness in this world to what God has declared in the Bible. And of course, in Russell's worldview, there is no ultimate arbiter of justice - the Hitlers and Pol Pots of this world receive, in his eyes, exactly the same ultimate recompense as Mother Theresa or Thomas Barnardo. The writer of Ecclesiastes would rightly declare this position as 'futile'.

However, before he leads us into more crass conclusions consistent with a blind, pitiless universe where the cries for justice are ignored, Russell is careful to terminate his argument by reminding us that most people are not, in any case, motivated by intellectual argument (presumably, he means when they adopt a faith position), but rather believe in God because they've been brainwashed from childhood. He sees that as the "main reason" for religious belief.

It is difficult to determine whether this is a culturally-influenced perspective, rather than a considered reason. Perhaps people back in 1927 were generally rather more 'churchy' than they are now? Judging by the statistics relating to church attendance in the West, that certainly appears likely - but how then are we to treat with the more modern regurgitations of this contention, in the writings of the 'new atheists' such as Richard Dawkins. The latter makes a big deal of this argument in his polemic, 'The God Delusion'. Apparently, whilst children are quite capable of unlearning fictions such as Father Christmas, they do not possess the capacity to repeat the exercise when it comes to God. And, of course, the whole argument depends upon the notion that myriads of youngsters in the West are having faith beaten into them from a very early age - and this, we know, is far from being true (if it ever was). The argument seems to me to be a convenient, dismissive and entirely simplistic explanation for why people choose to believe what they do.

Indeed, this brief paragraph towards the end of this section does raise as big a question for Russell. If people choose to believe in (or not believe in) God for emotional, or reasons other than intellectual conviction, would that principle apply equally well to the devout secularist? Presumably, in his thought-world, the only people capable of intellectual argument are atheists.

The Character of Christ

Thus far we have seen that Russell's rhetoric is very far from living up to all the hype. It is, predictably, when he comes to more directly engage with the biblical data, that his treatment slips more ignominiously into the mire. Firstly, he commits the vanity of concluding that he is more in agreement with Christ than many Christians, and seeks to prove his point by mis-citing two sayings of Christ, using the a kind of pre-Dawkinsian disdain for context. Most Christians, who know their New Testaments will be able to interpret Christ's meaning simply by referencing the immediate context - and arrive at quite a different conclusion to Russell.

A little later, he seizes on the encounter between Christ and the 'rich young ruler' where our Lord encourages the latter to sell all that he has, give it to the poor...and follow Him. Except, of course, Russell completely excises the last little bit, showing that he has utterly and completely failed to understand the passage in context - I wonder if he has picked this example in order to remind his audience of the fact that he gave away his own inheritance? Is Russell suggesting to us that he was able to do the one thing which the rich young ruler could not, and therefore is more deserving of merit? For a man whose antics were subject to considerable moral comment, this might well have been an important motivation.

This, of course, is merely a brief preliminary in order to educate his audience in...

Defects in Christ's Teaching

Here we experience more of the same. There's the odd little gem, such as "Historically, it's quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about Him..." Russell is something of a victim of early higher criticism, which so confidently and with so little intellectual basis, excised the significance of the historical content of the biblical narratives. Thankfully, we know a great deal more now than we did in 1927, not that this prevents modern-day atheists from referencing the likes of Russell when it suits them.

From this inauspicious start, he embarks on an exercise in obfuscation, seeking to interpret texts that Christ uses of His resurrection, to apply to His second coming. Nobody denies how important it is to exegete such passages carefully, but there's not even a token effort here - thus Russell leaps to the conclusion that Christ is simply wrong, or lacking in wisdom - if, of course, He even existed. Which He probably didn't, because of course there is no historical validity to the Gospel narratives...so why, then, is Russell even discussing the wisdom of Christ's teaching?

Yep, it beggars belief, doesn't it? The very same sources which Russell would decry as being non-valid, are the sources he uses to prove that there were defects in Christ's teaching. This is the 'penny and the bun'

method of argument, and one finds significant similarities between this and the writings of Christopher Hitchens.

And, so we come to...

The Moral Problem

Interesting, isn't it, that Russell is happy to raise the issue of the 'moral problem' in relation to the person of Christ, when in the earlier section dealing with moral issues, he seems to affect more than a slight degree of ambivalence about the topic? Somehow, all becomes black and white when it comes to pronouncing largely baseless verdicts on the incarnate Son of God!

This is probably not the place to get embroiled in a lengthy treatment of the nature of hell, or its moral validity. It is worth starting by understanding where Russell is coming from - note the following statement: "I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in eternal punishment." There is a magic word in there which I want to underscore - "feel". Whilst our 'feelings' are no doubt valid, hitherto Russell appears to have been at great pains to emphasise the superiority of intellectual argument over emotion or other bases for belief. Here, however, when he comes to treat with what is admittedly a very challenging topic, what appears to be important is what he 'feels' about it.

I am not seeking to diminish the importance of whatever Russell did or did not 'feel' about the subject, but in the context of this discourse, it is important to understand what he is saying. I do not, for instance, 'feel' that the speeding ticket I received on a straight stretch of road, where there has never been an accident, is 'fair' - but my 'feelings' on the matter are unlikely to alter the end result. I will receive a fixed penalty and see three points on my licence: my 'feelings' have absolutely no relevance to the ultimate truth of the matter.

But let's move on. Because we pass from the debatable issue of Russell's 'feelings' to his treatment of Christ's words about hell in the Gospels. He (correctly) acknowledges that our Lord does, in several places, issue warnings to His listeners about hell, but then (quite incorrectly) gives us the following gloss: "...and one does find repeatedly a vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching." Russell does not *like* the fact that Christ's utterances about this subject are passionate, heartfelt, earnest and brimming with conviction - he prefers the model of Socrates (who might not have existed by Russell's own standards) who is more "...bland and urbane towards the people who would not listen to him...". He *really* does not like the fact that Christ "...takes the line of indignation..."

This is really too much. If hell is real (and after all, if anyone would know the truth of the matter, it would probably be the Son of God), then surely it needs to be spoken about with conviction and passion - not with the kind of mealy-mouthed urbanity that Russell appears to applaud. He says, "I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindliness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world." No, such a person, would presumably avoid warning people of their danger. Such a person, if he was even aware of the existence of hell, would present the matter in the most neutral or non-alarmist way possible. He would paint the moral options in pastel colours. And, of course, he would apply exactly the same logic to every other danger that humanity might face - so no more road warnings, no more danger signs on the railways or at electricity substations, no more government health warnings on ciggies - after all, they might just engender fear and anxiety. And that would be wrong, right?

Russell continues relentlessly with this kind of misrepresentation: "...and He goes on about the wailing and gnashing of teeth. It comes in one verse after another, and it is quite manifest to the reader that there is a certain pleasure in contemplating wailing and gnashing of teeth..." Well, it doesn't occur to this reader! In fact, when you read about Christ weeping over Jerusalem, the message is quite clear: Christ evinces no pleasure in contemplating the end results of the moral choices we make for ourselves. Quite the reverse. The repeated warnings are indeed a sign of great heartfelt concern and love towards a generation which consistently, absolutely and irrevocably will not listen to Him.

Towards the end of this tortuous section, Russell parodies for us Christ's encounter with the Gadarene swine, when He sends the demons into the sea, and tops this feat with the judgment of the non-fruiting figtree. Both parodies are heavily dependent upon a wholehearted disavowal of the role of either context of cultural background. Just a little enquiry into the matter would have provided an entirely different insight into the significance of the passages in question - I strongly suspect that Russell would be loathe to display the same cavalier approach towards any other kind of literary source.

The Emotional Factor

This is a brief section within the whole, and is largely dependent upon the argument previously advanced, which is reiterated here: "...I do not think that the real reason why people accept religion has anything to do with argumentation. They accept religion on emotional grounds..."

This is altogether too simplistic a view to treat with much respect. As we have already seen, Russell himself is as prone to deciding issues of religious truth based upon what he feels, and the canon of atheist literature is littered with similar examples. Indeed a number of modern-day atheists have actually been remarkably open about the matter - they acknowledge that the stance they take on science is entirely influenced by what they *feel* about the nature of reality and purpose.

It is this aspect of the simplistic diagnosis that is perhaps the most frustrating when, as a Christian, one seeks to engage effectively with the proponents of Russell's style of atheism - for he continues the trend towards the end of this brief section where he attributes all barriers to improvement or progress as deriving from organised Christianity. One does not, for one moment, minimise the significance of nominal religion as a hindrance to progress, but the reality is that our hospitals, hospices, schools, colleges, orphanages etc owe a fundamental debt to principled and convinced Christians. Thomas Barnado set up his orphanages despite the opposition of secular authorities - and the same is true in respect of those engaged in the abolition of slavery or child exploitation. No, the picture is not absolutely black and white - but we live in a messy world where people's motives and actions are at times confused and counterproductive. Unfortunately, Bertrand Russell appears to wish to live in a world of simplistic caricatures.

How Churches Have Retarded Progress

Russell's explanation of how Christian belief may (or may not) have been an obstacle to progress again centres on the Roman Catholic church. I really have no basis for determining the matter one way or another, since my purpose here is not to defend the actions or inactions of the Roman Catholic approach to religion -

as Russell would have been aware, culturally Protestantism is an entirely different animal, having formed the intellectual basis for democracy in the West.

Of course, whether or not we wish to interpret Christianity solely from the perspective of Roman Catholic dogma, is immaterial. What is more significant is the fact that Russell's approach is to take an absolutely worse-case scenario (the dilemma of an "inexperienced girl married to a syphilitic man") in order to score another one of his rather simplistic points. He justifies this in the following way: "It is not a pleasant fact, but the churches compel one to mention facts that are not pleasant". This is specious. No-one is compelling him to mention anything, least of all a transparently-concocted case-study, warped in such a way to influence a non-discriminating audience.

There are plenty of 'difficult questions' in life - for believers, atheists and agnostics - but these kinds of mindgames, where the extreme severity of the example is clearly intended to 'prove' a somewhat debatable point, are not a serious contribution. This simply smacks of the desire to 'win' the argument, irrespective of the significance of the issue, and is in many ways simply symptomatic of a strategy which trivialises serious dilemmas in order to rubbish the opposition.

Fear, the Foundation of Religion

Russell believes that "Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear". To emphasise the point, he repeats the word 'fear' time and time again in the next few sentences. In Russell's mind, 'fear' is a bad thing. He sees it as inappropriate that people should be motivated by it, so lets explore this concept for a moment.

Why do I avoid changing lightbulbs with wet hands whilst the electricity is switched on? Probably a perfectly justifiable fear of getting electrocuted may have something to do with it. Why do I not smoke, when actually in the past I've quite enjoyed the odd cigar? Perhaps fear of the health consequences may have something to do with it. You see, there are things about which it is perfectly reasonable and healthy to exercise a degree of fear. Do I fear the oncoming juggernaut? I should do. Do I deliberately wind up the seven-foot thug employed as a bouncer at the local night-club? No, I have a healthy respect - or *fear* - of this person.

The issue then is not fear itself, but rather whether or not it is misplaced. If God is the sovereign Creator of the universe, who holds my puny life in His hands, should I at least respect Him? You bet!

Of course, for the Christian, his relationship with his God is based primarily on *love* not fear - so again, Russell's argument almost completely misses the mark.

What We Must Do

And so we reach our conclusion. Where Russell ends up has been determined by (a) his opening gambit and (b) his assumptions. He exhorts us to look at the world as it is - which is precisely the hard realism that the Bible encourages us to adopt, but this is not the way he sees it at all. He comments upon people debasing themselves in Church, reflecting some version of Christianity that thankfully I've never experienced. He

suggests that "We ought to stand up and look the world frankly in the face." as if this is something that only atheists can do, and which Christians are incapable of. On the ground, the reality is far from conforming to his viewpoint - we see Christians giving up well-paid, high-profile jobs in order to serve the homeless, or work in leprosy missions and AIDS hospitals, rather than devote their lives to the somewhat arid and futile arguments about God's existence, or parroting Dawkins, which appear to swallow up disproportionate amounts of time and space on the atheist webforums. Of course, it's important to avoid the same kinds of stereotypes that rejoice the hearts of Russell and his cohorts – we need to recognise that it's not just Christians who behave selflessly in the most challenging circumstances.

I do, however, want to close exactly where Russell does: "It needs hope for the future, not looking back all the time towards a past that is dead..." Which is precisely where the New Testament leaves us. Paul exhorts Christians not to be constantly looking behind them, but to focus on the future goal of the life of faith. John anticipates a beautiful, remade world where the consequences of human sin and rebellion are finally dealt with - one which fulfils the ultimate purpose of its Creator. Russell, by contrast (see earlier) shows us a future which is cold and lifeless, where the products of intelligent life wither and decay, ultimately without any lasting purpose. Christians believe in a bigger, better future, whereas Russell, for all his fine rhetoric, can actually supply us with no real basis for optimism - in his future, the traffic lights continue to switch, automatically, between green, amber and red, long after the cars have ceased to drive on the roads, as a dying sun consigns our world to permafrost.

In Closing

This speech is not the only item Bertrand Russell produced on the subject, but it is certainly the best known - and without doubt it continues to be a core text that the modern atheist camp relies on and looks back to. You will, for instance, find the text of the speech as a free download on the Secularist Society and other atheist websites. So many of Russell's themes and assumptions emerge later on in the writings of Richard Dawkins and his happy band.

In his recourse to the misuse and misrepresentation of Scripture, Russell demonstrates clearly that his dogma determines the way he will treat the data and sets a standard that others will emulate.

In his use of fallacies and simplistic arguments, Russell demonstrates that purely humanistic philosophy does not necessarily result in intellectually honest or dependable conclusions.

And, with his recourse to his own feelings as a basis for argument, Russell shows us that philosophy is ultimately dependent upon the fickleness of our whims and emotions - and that therefore even the most strident declarations of intellectual objectivity should be taken within context.

January 2010

Why I Am Not A Christian by Bertrand Russell

Introductory note: Russell delivered this lecture on March 6, 1927 to the National Secular Society, South London Branch, at Battersea Town Hall. Published in pamphlet form in that same year, the essay subsequently achieved new fame with Paul Edwards' edition of Russell's book, *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays* ... (1957).

As your Chairman has told you, the subject about which I am going to speak to you tonight is "Why I Am Not a Christian." Perhaps it would be as well, first of all, to try to make out what one means by the word *Christian*. It is used these days in a very loose sense by a great many people. Some people mean no more by it than a person who attempts to live a good life. In that sense I suppose there would be Christians in all sects and creeds; but I do not think that that is the proper sense of the word, if only because it would imply that all the people who are not Christians -- all the Buddhists, Confucians, Mohammedans, and so on -- are not trying to live a good life. I do not mean by a Christian any person who tries to live decently according to his lights. I think that you must have a certain amount of definite belief before you have a right to call yourself a Christian. The word does not have quite such a full-blooded meaning now as it had in the times of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. In those days, if a man said that he was a Christian it was known what he meant. You accepted a whole collection of creeds which were set out with great precision, and every single syllable of those creeds you believed with the whole strength of your convictions.

What Is a Christian?

Nowadays it is not quite that. We have to be a little more vague in our meaning of Christianity. I think, however, that there are two different items which are quite essential to anybody calling himself a Christian. The first is one of a dogmatic nature -- namely, that you must believe in God and immortality. If you do not believe in those two things, I do not think that you can properly call yourself a Christian. Then, further than that, as the name implies, you must have some kind of belief about Christ. The Mohammedans, for instance, also believe in God and in immortality, and yet they would not call themselves Christians. I think you must have at the very lowest the belief that Christ was, if not divine, at least the best and wisest of men. If you are not going to believe that much about Christ, I do not think you have any right to call yourself a Christian. Of course, there is another sense, which you find in Whitaker's Almanack and in geography books, where the population of the world is said to be divided into Christians, Mohammedans, Buddhists, fetish worshipers, and so on; and in that sense we are all Christians. The geography books count us all in, but that is a purely geographical sense, which I suppose we can ignore. Therefore I take it that when I tell you why I am not a Christian I have to tell you two different things: first, why I do not believe in God and in immortality; and, secondly, why I do not think that Christ was the best and wisest of men, although I grant him a very high degree of moral goodness.

But for the successful efforts of unbelievers in the past, I could not take so elastic a definition of

Christianity as that. As I said before, in olden days it had a much more full-blooded sense. For instance, it included he belief in hell. Belief in eternal hell-fire was an essential item of Christian belief until pretty recent times. In this country, as you know, it ceased to be an essential item because of a decision of the Privy Council, and from that decision the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Archbishop of York dissented; but in this country our religion is settled by Act of Parliament, and therefore the Privy Council was able to override their Graces and hell was no longer necessary to a Christian. Consequently I shall not insist that a Christian must believe in hell.

The Existence of God

To come to this question of the existence of God: it is a large and serious question, and if I were to attempt to deal with it in any adequate manner I should have to keep you here until Kingdom Come, so that you will have to excuse me if I deal with it in a somewhat summary fashion. You know, of course, that the Catholic Church has laid it down as a dogma that the existence of God can be proved by the unaided reason. That is a somewhat curious dogma, but it is one of their dogmas. They had to introduce it because at one time the freethinkers adopted the habit of saying that there were such and such arguments which mere reason might urge against the existence of God, but of course they knew as a matter of faith that God did exist. The arguments and the reasons were set out at great length, and the Catholic Church felt that they must stop it. Therefore they laid it down that the existence of God can be proved by the unaided reason and they had to set up what they considered were arguments to prove it. There are, of course, a number of them, but I shall take only a few.

The First-cause Argument

Perhaps the simplest and easiest to understand is the argument of the First Cause. (It is maintained that everything we see in this world has a cause, and as you go back in the chain of causes further and further you must come to a First Cause, and to that First Cause you give the name of God.) That argument, I suppose, does not carry very much weight nowadays, because, in the first place, cause is not quite what it used to be. The philosophers and the men of science have got going on cause, and it has not anything like the vitality it used to have; but, apart from that, you can see that the argument that there must be a First Cause is one that cannot have any validity. I may say that when I was a young man and was debating these questions very seriously in my mind, I for a long time accepted the argument of the First Cause, until one day, at the age of eighteen, I read John Stuart Mill's Autobiography, and I there found this sentence: "My father taught me that the question 'Who made me?' cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question `Who made god?'" That very simple sentence showed me, as I still think, the fallacy in the argument of the First Cause. If everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there can be anything without a cause, it may just as well be the world as God, so that there cannot be any validity in that argument. It is exactly of the same nature as the Hindu's view, that the world rested upon an elephant and the elephant rested upon a tortoise; and when they said, "How about the tortoise?" the Indian said, "Suppose we change the subject." The argument is really no better than that. There is no reason why the world could not have come into being without a cause; nor, on the other hand, is there any reason why it should not have always existed. There is no reason to suppose that the world had a beginning at

all. The idea that things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our imagination. Therefore, perhaps, I need not waste any more time upon the argument about the First Cause.

The Natural-law Argument

Then there is a very common argument from natural law. That was a favorite argument all through the eighteenth century, especially under the influence of Sir Isaac Newton and his cosmogony. People observed the planets going around the sun according to the law of gravitation, and they thought that God had given a behest to these planets to move in that particular fashion, and that was why they did so. That was, of course, a convenient and simple explanation that saved them the trouble of looking any further for explanations of the law of gravitation. Nowadays we explain the law of gravitation in a somewhat complicated fashion that Einstein has introduced. I do not propose to give you a lecture on the law of gravitation, as interpreted by Einstein, because that again would take some time; at any rate, you no longer have the sort of natural law that you had in the Newtonian system, where, for some reason that nobody could understand, nature behaved in a uniform fashion. We now find that a great many things we thought were natural laws are really human conventions. You know that even in the remotest depths of stellar space there are still three feet to a yard. That is, no doubt, a very remarkable fact, but you would hardly call it a law of nature. And a great many things that have been regarded as laws of nature are of that kind. On the other hand, where you can get down to any knowledge of what atoms actually do, you will find they are much less subject to law than people thought, and that the laws at which you arrive are statistical averages of just the sort that would emerge from chance. There is, as we all know, a law that if you throw dice you will get double sixes only about once in thirty-six times, and we do not regard that as evidence that the fall of the dice is regulated by design; on the contrary, if the double sixes came every time we should think that there was design. The laws of nature are of that sort as regards a great many of them. They are statistical averages such as would emerge from the laws of chance; and that makes this whole business of natural law much less impressive than it formerly was. Quite apart from that, which represents the momentary state of science that may change tomorrow, the whole idea that natural laws imply a lawgiver is due to a confusion between natural and human laws. Human laws are behests commanding you to behave a certain way, in which you may choose to behave, or you may choose not to behave; but natural laws are a description of how things do in fact behave, and being a mere description of what they in fact do, you cannot argue that there must be somebody who told them to do that, because even supposing that there were, you are then faced with the question "Why did God issue just those natural laws and no others?" If you say that he did it simply from his own good pleasure, and without any reason, you then find that there is something which is not subject to law, and so your train of natural law is interrupted. If you say, as more orthodox theologians do, that in all the laws which God issues he had a reason for giving those laws rather than others -- the reason, of course, being to create the best universe, although you would never think it to look at it -- if there were a reason for the laws which God gave, then God himself was subject to law, and therefore you do not get any advantage by introducing God as an intermediary. You really have a law outside and anterior to the divine edicts, and God does not serve your purpose, because he is not the ultimate lawgiver. In short, this whole argument about natural law no longer has anything like the strength that it used to have. I am traveling on in time in my review of the arguments. The arguments that are used for the existence of God change their character as time goes on. They were at first hard intellectual

arguments embodying certain quite definite fallacies. As we come to modern times they become less respectable intellectually and more and more affected by a kind of moralizing vagueness.

The Argument from Design

The next step in the process brings us to the argument from design. You all know the argument from design: everything in the world is made just so that we can manage to live in the world, and if the world was ever so little different, we could not manage to live in it. That is the argument from design. It sometimes takes a rather curious form; for instance, it is argued that rabbits have white tails in order to be easy to shoot. I do not know how rabbits would view that application. It is an easy argument to parody. You all know Voltaire's remark, that obviously the nose was designed to be such as to fit spectacles. That sort of parody has turned out to be not nearly so wide of the mark as it might have seemed in the eighteenth century, because 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.

When you come to look into this argument from design, it is a most astonishing thing that people can believe that this world, with all the things that are in it, with all its defects, should be the best that omnipotence and omniscience have been able to produce in millions of years. I really cannot believe it. Do you think that, if you were granted omnipotence and omniscience and millions of years in which to perfect your world, you could produce nothing better than the Ku Klux Klan or the Fascists? Moreover, if you accept the ordinary laws of science, you have to suppose that human life and life in general on this planet will die out in due course: it is a stage in the decay of the solar system; at a certain stage of decay you get the sort of conditions of temperature and so forth which are suitable to protoplasm, and there is life for a short time in the life of the whole solar system. You see in the moon the sort of thing to which the earth is tending -- something dead, cold, and lifeless.

I am told that that sort of view is depressing, and people will sometimes tell you that if they believed that, they would not be able to go on living. Do not believe it; it is all nonsense. Nobody really worries about much about what is going to happen millions of years hence. Even if they think they are worrying much about that, they are really deceiving themselves. They are worried about something much more mundane, or it may merely be a bad digestion; but nobody is really seriously rendered unhappy by the thought of something that is going to happen to this world millions and millions of years hence. Therefore, although it is of course a gloomy view to suppose that life will die out -- at least I suppose we may say so, although sometimes when I contemplate the things that people do with their lives I think it is almost a consolation -- it is not such as to render life miserable. It merely makes you turn your attention to other things.

The Moral Arguments for Deity

Now we reach one stage further in what I shall call the intellectual descent that the Theists have made in their argumentations, and we come to what are called the moral arguments for the existence of God. You all know, of course, that there used to be in the old days three intellectual arguments for the

existence of God, all of which were disposed of by Immanuel Kant in the *Critique of Pure Reason*; but no sooner had he disposed of those arguments than he invented a new one, a moral argument, and that quite convinced him. He was like many people: in intellectual matters he was skeptical, but in moral matters he believed implicitly in the maxims that he had imbibed at his mother's knee. That illustrates what the psychoanalysts so much emphasize -- the immensely stronger hold upon us that our very early associations have than those of later times.

Kant, as I say, invented a new moral argument for the existence of God, and that in varying forms was extremely popular during the nineteenth century. It has all sorts of forms. One form is to say there would be no right or wrong unless God existed. I am not for the moment concerned with whether there is a difference between right and wrong, or whether there is not: that is another question. The point I am concerned with is that, if you are quite sure there is a difference between right and wrong, then you are in this situation: Is that difference due to God's fiat or is it not? If it is due to God's fiat, then for God himself there is no difference between right and wrong, and it is no longer a significant statement to say that God is good. 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 and not bad independently of the mere fact that he made them. If you are going to say that, you will then have to say that it is not only through God that right and wrong came into being, but that they are in their essence logically anterior to God. You could, of course, if you liked, say that there was a superior deity who gave orders to the God that made this world, or could take up the line that some of the gnostics took up -- a line which I often thought was a very plausible one -that as a matter of fact this world that we know was made by the devil at a moment when God was not looking. There is a good deal to be said for that, and I am not concerned to refute it.

The Argument for the Remedying of Injustice

Then there is another very curious form of moral argument, which is this: they say that the existence of God is required in order to bring justice into the world. In the part of this universe that we know there is great injustice, and often the good suffer, and often the wicked prosper, and one hardly knows which of those is the more annoying; but if you are going to have justice in the universe as a whole you have to suppose a future life to redress the balance of life here on earth. So they say that there must be a God, and there must be Heaven and Hell in order that in the long run there may be justice. That is a very curious argument. If you looked at the matter from a scientific point of view, you would say, "After all, I only know this world. I do not know about the rest of the universe, but so far as one can argue at all on probabilities one would say that probably this world is a fair sample, and if there is injustice here the odds are that there is injustice elsewhere also." Supposing you got a crate of oranges that you opened, and you found all the top layer of oranges bad, you would not argue, "The underneath ones must be good, so as to redress the balance." You would say, "Probably the whole lot is a bad consignment"; and that is really what a scientific person would argue about the universe. He would say, "Here we find in this world a great deal of injustice, and so far as that goes that is a reason for supposing that justice does not rule in the world; and therefore so far as it goes it affords a moral argument against deity and not in favor of one." Of course I know that the sort of intellectual arguments that I have been talking to you about are not what really moves people. What really moves people to believe in God is not any intellectual argument at all. Most people believe in God because they have been taught from early infancy to do it, and that is the main reason.

Then I think that the next most powerful reason is the wish for safety, a sort of feeling that there is a big brother who will look after you. That plays a very profound part in influencing people's desire for a belief in God.

The Character of Christ

I now want to say a few words upon a topic which I often think is not quite sufficiently dealt with by Rationalists, and that is the question whether Christ was the best and the wisest of men. It is generally taken for granted that we should all agree that that was so. I do not myself. I think that there are a good many points upon which I agree with Christ a great deal more than the professing Christians do. I do not know that I could go with Him all the way, but I could go with Him much further than most professing Christians can. You will remember that He said, "Resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." That is not a new precept or a new principle. It was used by Lao-tse and Buddha some 500 or 600 years before Christ, but it is not a principle which as a matter of fact Christians accept. I have no doubt that the present prime minister [Stanley Baldwin], for instance, is a most sincere Christian, but I should not advise any of you to go and smite him on one cheek. I think you might find that he thought this text was intended in a figurative sense.

Then there is another point which I consider excellent. You will remember that Christ said, "Judge not lest ye be judged." That principle I do not think you would find was popular in the law courts of Christian countries. I have known in my time quite a number of judges who were very earnest Christians, and none of them felt that they were acting contrary to Christian principles in what they did. Then Christ says, "Give to him that asketh of thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away." That is a very good principle. Your Chairman has reminded you that we are not here to talk politics, but I cannot help observing that the last general election was fought on the question of how desirable it was to turn away from him that would borrow of thee, so that one must assume that the Liberals and Conservatives of this country are composed of people who do not agree with the teaching of Christ, because they certainly did very emphatically turn away on that occasion.

Then there is one other maxim of Christ which I think has a great deal in it, but I do not find that it is very popular among some of our Christian friends. He says, "If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that which thou hast, and give to the poor." That is a very excellent maxim, but, as I say, it is not much practised. All these, I think, are good maxims, although they are a little difficult to live up to. I do not profess to live up to them myself; but then, after all, it is not quite the same thing as for a Christian.

Defects in Christ's Teaching

Having granted the excellence of these maxims, I come to certain points in which I do not believe that one can grant either the superlative wisdom or the superlative goodness of Christ as depicted in the Gospels; and here I may say that one is not concerned with the historical question. Historically it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about him, so that I am not concerned with the historical question, which is a very difficult one. I am concerned with Christ as He appears in the Gospels, taking the Gospel narrative as it stands, and there one does find some things that do not seem to be very wise. For one thing, he certainly thought that His second

coming would occur in clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at that time. There are a great many texts that prove that. He says, for instance, "Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel till the Son of Man be come." Then he says, "There are some standing here which shall not taste death till the Son of Man comes into His kingdom"; and there are a lot of places where it is quite clear that He believed that His second coming would happen during the lifetime of many then living. That was the belief of His earlier followers, and it was the basis of a good deal of His moral teaching. When He said, "Take no thought for the morrow," and things of that sort, 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. I have, as a matter of fact, known some Christians who did believe that the second coming was imminent. I knew a parson who frightened his congregation terribly by telling them that the second coming was very imminent indeed, but they were much consoled when they found that he was planting trees in his garden. The early Christians did really believe it, and they did abstain from such things as planting trees in their gardens, because they did accept from Christ the belief that the second coming was imminent. In that respect, clearly He was not so wise as some other people have been, and He was certainly not superlatively wise.

The Moral Problem

Then you come to moral questions. There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that He believed in hell. I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment. Christ certainly 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 -- an attitude which is not uncommon with preachers, but which does somewhat detract from superlative excellence. You do not, for instance find that attitude in Socrates. You find him quite bland and urbane toward the people who would not listen to him; and it is, to my mind, far more worthy of a sage to take that line than to take the line of indignation. You probably all remember the sorts of things that Socrates was saying when he was dying, and the sort of things that he generally did say to people who did not agree with him.

You will find that in the Gospels Christ said, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of Hell." That was said to people who did not like His preaching. It is not really to my mind quite the best tone, and there are a great many of these things about Hell. There is, of course, the familiar text about the sin against the Holy Ghost: "Whosoever speaketh against the Holy Ghost it shall not be forgiven him neither in this World nor in the world to come." That text has caused an unspeakable amount of misery in the world, for all sorts of people have imagined that they have committed the sin against the Holy Ghost, and thought that it would not be forgiven them either in this world or in the world to come. I really do not think that a person with a proper degree of kindliness in his nature would have put fears and terrors of that sort into the world.

Then Christ says, "The Son of Man shall send forth his His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity, and shall cast them into a furnace of fire; there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth"; and He goes on about the wailing and gnashing of teeth. It comes in one verse after another, and 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. Then you all, of course, remember about the sheep and the goats; how at the second coming He is going to divide the

sheep from the goats, and He is going to say to the goats, "Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire." He continues, "And these shall go away into everlasting fire." Then He says again, "If thy hand offend thee, cut it off; it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into Hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched; where the worm dieth not and the fire is not quenched." He repeats that again and again also. I must say that I think all this doctrine, that hell-fire is a punishment for sin, is a doctrine of cruelty. It is a doctrine that put cruelty into the world and gave the world generations of cruel torture; and the Christ of the Gospels, if you could take Him asHis chroniclers represent Him, would certainly have to be considered partly responsible for that.

There are other things of less importance. There is the instance of the Gadarene swine, where it certainly was not very kind to the pigs to put the devils into them and make them rush down the hill into the sea. You must remember that He was omnipotent, and He could have made the devils simply go away; but He chose to send them into the pigs. Then there is the curious story of the fig tree, which always rather puzzled me. You remember what happened about the fig tree. "He was hungry; and seeing a fig tree afar off having leaves, He came if haply He might find anything thereon; and when He came to it He found nothing but leaves, for the time of figs was not yet. And Jesus answered and said unto it: 'No man eat fruit of thee hereafter for ever' . . . and Peter . . . saith unto Him: 'Master, behold the fig tree which thou cursedst is withered away.'" This is a very curious story, because it was not the right time of year for figs, and you really could not blame the tree. I cannot myself 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. I think I should put Buddha and Socrates above Him in those respects.

The Emotional Factor

As I said before, I do not think that the real reason why people accept religion has anything to do with argumentation. They accept religion on emotional grounds. One is often told that it is a very wrong thing to attack religion, because religion makes men virtuous. So I am told; I have not noticed it. You know, of course, the parody of that argument in Samuel Butler's book, *Erewhon Revisited*. You will remember that in *Erewhon* there is a certain Higgs who arrives in a remote country, and after spending some time there he escapes from that country in a balloon. Twenty years later he comes back to that country and finds a new religion in which he is worshiped under the name of the "Sun Child," and it is said that he ascended into heaven. He finds that the Feast of the Ascension is about to be celebrated, and he hears Professors Hanky and Panky say to each other that they never set eyes on the man Higgs, and they hope they never will; but they are the high priests of the religion of the Sun Child. He is very indignant, and he comes up to them, and he says, "I am going to expose all this humbug and tell the people of Erewhon that it was only I, the man Higgs, and I went up in a balloon." He was told, "You must not do that, because all the morals of this country are bound round this myth, and if they once know that you did not ascend into Heaven they will all become wicked"; and so he is persuaded of that and he goes quietly away.

That is the idea -- that we should all be wicked if we did not hold to the Christian religion. It seems to me that the people who have held to it have been for the most part extremely wicked. You find this curious 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. In the so-called ages of faith, when men really did believe the Christian religion in all its completeness, there

was the Inquisition, with all its tortures; there were millions of unfortunate women burned as witches; and there was every kind of cruelty practiced upon all sorts of people in the name of religion.

You find as you look around the world that every single bit of progress in humane feeling, every improvement in the criminal law, every step toward the diminution of war, every step toward better treatment of the colored races, or every mitigation of slavery, every moral progress that there has been in the world, has been consistently opposed by the organized churches of the world. I say quite deliberately 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

You may think that I am going too far when I say that that is still so. I do not think that I am. Take one fact. You will bear with me if I mention it. It is not a pleasant fact, but the churches compel one to mention facts that are not pleasant. Supposing that in this world that we live in today an inexperienced girl is married to a syphilitic man; in that case the Catholic Church says, "This is an indissoluble sacrament. You must endure celibacy or stay together. And if you stay together, you must not use birth control to prevent the birth of syphilitic children." 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.

That is only an example. There are a great many ways in which, at the present moment, the church, by its insistence upon what it chooses to call morality, inflicts upon all sorts of people undeserved and unnecessary suffering. And of course, as we know, it is in its major part an opponent still of progress and 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."

Fear, the Foundation of Religion

Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown and partly, as I have said, the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes. Fear is the basis of the whole thing -- fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder if cruelty and religion have gone hand in hand. It is because fear is at the basis of those two things. In this world we can now begin a little to understand things, and a little to master them by 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. Science can help us to get over this craven fear in which mankind has lived for so many generations. Science can teach us, and I think our own hearts can teach us, no longer to look around 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 better place to live in, instead of the sort of place that the churches in all these centuries have made it.

What We Must Do

We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world -- its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness; see the world as it is and be not afraid of it. Conquer the world by intelligence and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it. The whole conception of God is a conception derived from the ancient Oriental despotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men. When you hear people in church debasing themselves and saying that they are miserable sinners, and all the rest of it, it seems contemptible and not worthy of self-respecting human beings. We ought to stand up and look the world frankly in the face. We ought to make the best we can of the world, and if it is not so good as we wish, after all it will still be better than what these others have made of it in all these ages. A good world needs knowledge, kindliness, and courage; it does not need a regretful hankering after the past or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men. It needs a fearless outlook and a free intelligence. It needs hope for the future, not looking back all the time toward a past that is dead, which we trust will be far surpassed by the future that our intelligence can create.

Electronic colophon: This electronic edition of "Why I Am Not a Christian" was first made available by Bruce MacLeod on his "Watchful Eye Russell Page." It was newly corrected (from Edwards, NY 1957) in July 1996 by John R. Lenz for the Bertrand Russell Society.

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