

# Why I Am Not Convinced

## A Critical Review Of Bertrand Russell's "Why I Am Not A Christian."

When the lecture, "*Why I Am Not A Christian*"<sup>1</sup> by Bertrand Russell, was first presented on March 6, 1927, to the National Secular Society, it was a bomb that was felt across the globe and for generations to come. Bertrand Russell was one of the greatest philosophical minds of the twentieth century and one of the most notorious atheists of his day. Even in the twenty first century, many arguments used by the "New Atheists" are merely recycled arguments from Russell, but with a little more foam at the mouth. His books, essays, and lectures helped to shaped an entire world's views of many issues, including philosophy, mathematics, cosmology, language, and computer science. In 1950, he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

In his essay, Russell targeted arguments for belief in God and to support Christianity specifically. This essay has been a flagship writing for atheism for almost 90 years. But does it deserve that reputation? This article will be a critique of the reasons Russell gives for rejecting Christianity to provide encouragement for Christians and to challenge the reasons many atheists have rejected the faith.

### What Is A Christian?

Definitions are important so Russell preempts his critique by listing two traits that he sees as essential to a Christian: "you must believe in God and immortality...you must have some kind of belief about Christ."<sup>2</sup> For Russell, those beliefs about Christ must minimally include believing that "Christ was, if not divine, at least the best and wisest of men."<sup>3</sup> But the Bible itself describes many times that being a Christian means more than believing in God, because James points out that "the demons also believe, and shudder."<sup>4</sup> It is also more than believing that Jesus is a great person. To be a Christian is to "confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead."<sup>5</sup> True Christians not only believe in God and believe that Jesus was a "great man," but believe Jesus died for our sins and rose again<sup>6</sup>, proving divinity, defeating death and hell, and calling those who trust Him to obey.

<sup>1</sup> Russell, Bertrand. *Why I Am Not A Christian*. Touchstone Publishers, 1967.

<sup>2</sup> Russell, Bertrand. *Why I Am Not A Christian*. <http://www.users.drew.edu/~jlenz/whynot.html>. Pg. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Pg. 1.

<sup>4</sup> James 2:19. Scripture taken from the *NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE*, © Copyright The Lockman Foundation 1960,1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1988, 1995. Used by permission.

<sup>5</sup> Romans 10:9

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.

### Arguments Against Theism

#### 1. The First Cause Argument

Russell begins by attacking the idea that the universe requires a Cause. As he states the argument, "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 God."<sup>7</sup> What is his point?

"...the fallacy in the argument of the first cause (is) if everything must have a cause, then God must have a cause. If there 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."<sup>8</sup>

If God made everything, who made God? He then follows up his main point by making two possible explanations for the existence of the universe. He states, with no support or evidence:

"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."<sup>9</sup>

However, the flaws in Russell's fatal flaw begin with him misrepresenting the argument itself. The argument is not that everything must have a cause. If so, there would be an infinite number of causes and the universe would have never begun! No one is claiming that God began to exist. Instead, the argument is that everything that begins to exist must have a cause and that to begin the process of causation and avoid the infinite regress, there must be some uncaused thing. But this thing cannot be just any type of thing. Rather, because the effect is a time bound, energy driven, material universe that does not have to exist, the cause must be eternal, powerful, immaterial, and personal. Therefore, because this is the same description as the Bible gives for God, Christians call this cause "God." Christianity, long before the questions of modern science and philosophy, has always taught that God was eternally self-existent.<sup>10</sup>

A second problem is that the idea of something beginning to exist without a cause is irrational. Everything in our experience is based on a

<sup>7</sup> *Why I Am Not A Christian*.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Deuteronomy 33:27.

foundational belief in causation. If right, Russell has undermined science itself because science is a search for causes! If a universe can begin without a cause, why can't other things like rocks, people, or cash? It was the atheist philosopher David Hume who saw this two hundred years earlier when he wrote:

“But allow me to tell you that I never asserted so absurd a proposition as that anything might arise without a cause: I only maintained that our certainty of the falsehood of that proposition proceeded neither from intuition nor demonstration; but from another source.”<sup>11</sup>

Even at a time when quantum theory is touted as evidence that particles can “pop” into existence uncaused, quantum theorist David Albert points out:

“The fact that particles can pop in and out of existence, over time, as those fields rearrange themselves, is not a whit more mysterious than the fact that fists can pop in and out of existence, over time, as my fingers rearrange themselves. And none of these poppings...amount to anything even remotely in the neighborhood of a creation from nothing.”<sup>12</sup>

A third problem is that the past century has shown that the universe had a beginning. The second law of thermodynamics states the amount of usable energy in a closed system will always run down. This means that the universe has been slowly using up its available energy. But if the universe is running out of energy that means this process has not gone on forever because there would be no energy left. Evidence such as this and the evidence for the expanding universe discovered by Edwin Hubble in 1929 has led cosmologist Alexander Vilenkin to write, “With the proof now in place, cosmologists can no longer hide a past-eternal universe. They have to face the problem of cosmic beginning.”<sup>13</sup> Cosmologist Robert Jastrow also writes:

“For the scientist who has lived by his faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock,

he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries.”<sup>14</sup>

## 2. The Natural Law Argument

Russell next moves to the argument that nature runs itself according to physical laws, such as gravity, and laws require a lawgiver, thus God exists. Russell's main argument against this idea is that, “We now find that a great many things we thought were natural laws are really human conventions.”<sup>15</sup> Does this mean, for Russell, that two plus two could equal four in another part of the universe because these are simply human conventions? Russell acknowledges:

“even in the remotest depths of stellar space there are still three feet to a yard... but you would hardly call that a law of nature. And a great many things ...are of that kind.”<sup>16</sup>

So what would Russell call mathematical laws? What else is a human convention and not a cosmological necessity? He doesn't say. He does, however, make the point:

“The whole idea that natural laws imply a lawgiver is due to confusion between natural and human laws. Human laws are behests commanding you to behave a certain way...but natural laws are a description of how things do in fact behave.”<sup>17</sup>

Theists have argued that the cosmological constants are too finely tuned to be an accident or to have been brought about by natural selection. But to illustrate his point, Russell uses dice as an analogy:

“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 dice is regulated by design.”<sup>18</sup>

The argument of the theist, however, is not simply that there are natural laws. This is an important argument because why should a random universe be expected to be so finely regulated by uniform descriptions? But the real argument is that the precise combination of all these natural laws gives the greatest evidence of design. It isn't simply that one gets double sixes every thirty-sixth roll. It is that someone at the table just got double-sixes 1,000 times in a row! At that point, one would have to believe that more than chance is at work!

<sup>11</sup> David Hume to John Stewart, Feb. 1754, in *The Letters Of David Hume*, 2 Vol. ed. J.Y.T. Grieg, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932. 1:187.

<sup>12</sup> Albert, David. *On The Origin Of Everything: 'A Universe From Nothing.'* By Lawrence M. Krauss. The New York Times, March 23, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Vilenkin, Alexander. *Many Worlds In One: The Search For Other Universes.* Hill And Wang, 2007. Pg. 176.

<sup>14</sup> Jastrow, Robert. *God And The Astronomers.* New York: Norton, 2000. Pg. 107.

<sup>15</sup> *Why I Am Not A Christian*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*



“The human genome contains approximately 3 billion of these base pairs, which reside in the 23 pairs of chromosomes within the nucleus of all our cells. Each chromosome contains hundreds to thousands of genes, which carry the instructions for making proteins. Each of the estimated 30,000 genes in the human genome makes an average of three proteins.”<sup>31</sup>

DNA becomes the informational code to govern the organism. But where does information come from? All our experience points to intelligence behind information, leading philosophers and apologetists Norman Geisler and Frank Turek to write:

“When we conclude that intelligence created the first cell of the human brain, it’s not simply because we *lack* evidence of a natural explanation; it’s also because we have positive, empirically detectable evidence *for* an intelligent cause.”<sup>32</sup>

Second, the engines of natural selection and random mutation (variation) cannot bear the load they are asked to carry. In other words, they cannot produce the changes that are required to move from molecules to man and produce the specified complexity we see in the city of the cell or the interconnectivity of the various systems of the body. Because many of these systems require other systems, they could not have developed slowly, one organ at a time, over billions of years. How would an organism function with a heart that could pump blood, but not a system to create blood, a brain to control the system, lungs to oxygenate the blood, etc?

Natural selection cannot power the work because it only selects to preserve what already exists. Random mutations (errors in the copying of the genetic code) are also incapable of driving evolution because they may produce change but, by being random, they cannot create new information for an organism. They can destroy it and they can copy it, but they cannot write new code. The result is that almost all the changes are harmful to the organism and the few changes that convey an evolutionary advantage are actually an example of the loss of information, such as bacteria adaptation or the loss of eyes in cave dwelling fish. James Shapiro, a bacterial geneticist at the University of Chicago, writes:

“The argument that random variation and Darwinian gradualism may not be adequate to explain complex biological systems is hardly new... in fact, there are no detailed

<sup>31</sup> The Human Genome Project. <https://www.genome.gov/11006943>.

<sup>32</sup> Geisler, Norman L.; Turek, Frank. *I Don't Have Enough Faith To Be An Atheist*. Crossway Books, 2004. Pg. 157.

Darwinian accounts for the evolution of any fundamental biochemical or cellular system, only a variety of wishful speculations. It is remarkable that Darwinism is accepted as a satisfactory explanation for such a vast subject — evolution — with so little rigorous examination of how well its basic theses works in illuminating specific instances of biological adaptation or diversity.”<sup>33</sup>

Yet, Russell also rejects design on the basis of the apparent bad design in the world. He reasons:

“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.”<sup>34</sup>

Russell reasons that because creatures do bad things and die, they could not have been designed by a good designer. But the law of decay does not mean there was no design. Henry Ford did an amazing job designing his Model-T, but it broke down in time too! Further, Genesis 3 tells us that, because man sinned, separating himself from the goodness of his Creator, physical death and suffering followed. Finally, wasn't it Russell who argued against natural laws because the laws of nature were only human conventions anyway?

These kinds of evidences led Antony Flew, an equally prolific and philosophically minded atheist as Russell, to abandon his atheism. “It now seems to me,” said Flew, “that the findings of more than fifty years of DNA research have provided materials for a new and enormously powerful argument to design.”<sup>35</sup> For Flew, there is really only one explanation: a designer. He also writes, “The only satisfactory explanation for the origin of such ‘end-directed, self-replicating’ life as we see on earth is an infinitely intelligent Mind.”<sup>36</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Shapiro, James. *In the Details...What?* National Review, 19 September 1996. Pg. 64. <http://shapiro.bsd.uchicago.ed.....Review.pdf>

<sup>34</sup> *Why I Am Not A Christian*.

<sup>35</sup> Flew, Antony and Habermas, Gary. *My Pilgrimage From Atheism To Theism: A Discussion Between Antony Flew And Gary Habermas*. Philosophia Christi, Vol. 6. No. 2, 2004. Pg. 201.

<sup>36</sup> Flew, Antony and Varghese, Roy Abraham. *There is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind*. Harper One Publishers, New York, NY, 2007. Pg 132.

#### 4. The Moral Argument

Traditionally, the moral argument for God has been one of the most powerful arguments for theism. Russell rightly points at that Immanuel Kant was a leading proponent of this argument, though he was wrong that it was Kant who “invented it.”<sup>37</sup>

The Bible itself argues that morality is a testimony to our Creator in that we all, being made in the image of God, regardless of whether or not we believe it, have a conscience that teaches that some things, such as killing children for fun, are really wrong and are not simply arbitrary.<sup>38</sup> But the only way for such things to be really right or wrong is for there to be such a thing as right or wrong. There must be a standard that all people are obligated to obey. That is why a person can be thrown into prison for breaking a law they were obligated to keep. C.S. Lewis himself wrote:

“(As an atheist) my argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of just and unjust? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line.”<sup>39</sup>

But if God does not exist, where do real moral laws come from? Do they come from culture? If so, we are faced with the problem that might equals right. Does biology determine morality? Is the slogan “I was born this way” the ultimate trump card when it comes to morality? If so, then the person who is born with a propensity to kill others would be morally justified in doing so. Is morality a matter of preference? One person has one ethic and another has theirs. As long as a person’s morality doesn’t harm anyone, must it be ok? But even that is an appeal to a standard. Whose gets to decide that a person’s morality must not harm someone else? Is that just a preference? Without a fixed reference point, all morality is meaningless. It was Russell himself who later wrote, “I cannot live as if ethical values are simply a matter of personal taste. I do not know the solution.”<sup>40</sup>

But Russell sidesteps all of that by writing, “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.”<sup>41</sup> Russell doesn’t try to ground his morality in reality. Rather, he points out that if a Christian assumes there is a difference, he

asks, “Is that difference due to God’s fiat or not?”<sup>42</sup> In other words, is something good because God says it is good, or does God say it is good because it really is good?

The challenge is a difficult one. If one says that God decides morality, then morality is an arbitrary choice of God. He could have chosen one thing, but He chose another. Murder, rape, and lying aren’t really wrong; God just decided that they are. If, on the other hand, one argued that God calls these things wrong because they are truly wrong, then God is subject to the laws of morality and thus morality is not an argument for God because they are right or wrong independently of Him.

This argument is not new. Theologians for years have understood this struggle and have called it the Euthyphro Dilemma. Unfortunately for Russell, there is a third alternative. In the words of Scott Rae, “Morality is not grounded ultimately in God’s commands, but in His character, which then expresses itself in His commands.”<sup>43</sup> Something is good, not because God said it and not because there is a greater standard than God that He is obligated to, but because it is a reflection of God Himself. God created the world and a creation will always, in some way, reflect the personality of its creator. God Himself is the standard of goodness.

For example, lying is wrong. But it is not wrong simply because God says not to and it isn’t wrong because God has a standard against lying that He must keep. Lying is wrong because God is, by His very nature, truthful. The Bible teaches that God “cannot lie”<sup>44</sup> because He cannot violate His own nature. For God to lie would be like a square circle. Thus, Russell’s argument false prey to the false dichotomy fallacy.

#### 5. The Argument For The Remediating Of Injustice.

Russell’s final critique involves a rather strange argument. He states that theists believe “that there must be a God, and there must be a Heaven and Hell in order that in the long run there may be justice.”<sup>45</sup> The idea that Russell seems to be getting at is that many theists hope that God will, in the life to come, remedy the hurts and pains of this life, as the Bible promises.<sup>46</sup> But people do not generally use this as an argument for God’s existence. Rather, it is a statement of hope in the character of God.

<sup>37</sup> *Why I Am Not A Christian*.

<sup>38</sup> Romans 2:15.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis, C.S., *Mere Christianity*. Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., New York, 1952. Pg. 45

<sup>40</sup> Russell, Bertrand. *Letter to the Observer*. 1957.

<sup>41</sup> *Why I Am Not A Christian*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>43</sup> Scott Rae, *Moral Choices--An Introduction to Ethics*. Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1995. Pg. 32.

<sup>44</sup> Titus 1:2.

<sup>45</sup> *Why I Am Not A Christian*.

<sup>46</sup> Revelation 21.

Perhaps Russell is arguing against C.S. Lewis' argument from desire. Lewis states:

"A man's physical hunger does not prove that man will get any bread; he may die of starvation on a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man's hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will."<sup>47</sup>

The point C.S. Lewis makes is that, if a person longs for something, there is a high probability that they long for it because it exists. This is not to say, as Lewis points out, that such a desire proves the person will get what they long for, but only that such a thing is real. When a person longs for justice, peace, God, etc., Lewis argues that this longing is rooted in the ontological existence of such things.

While this is not an exceedingly convincing argument, it should be pointed out, in Lewis' defense, that not one other thing that humans long for does not exist. Everything that we need in the physical world has a referential point in reality. Lewis then makes the case that those things that are not physical must then have a reality in the life to come.

For Russell, however, this argument tips his hands as to what he believes is really the issue with theistic belief:

"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."<sup>48</sup>

For Russell, people believe in God because they were taught to. This is a disappointing point because a master philosopher should know that this is called the genetic fallacy. The fallacy judges the rightness or wrongness of a belief based upon the way a person came to believe it. This is called a fallacy because a person can hold a belief for any number of reasons, but those reasons do not make or break the rightness or wrongness of the belief itself. I may believe that Christopher Columbus founded America because my school teacher told me and because I was brought up believing it, but that doesn't mean he did or did not found America. The issue must be settled by the arguments for the thing, not by attacking the way a person came to believe the thing.

<sup>47</sup> Lewis, C.S. *Weight Of Glory*. HarperOne; HarperCollins REV ed.2001. Pg. 32-33.

<sup>48</sup> *Why I Am Not A Christian*.

When Russell's arguments against the arguments for theism are analyzed, they fall woefully short of making a dent. It is interesting to note that the best Russell can do is critique theistic arguments. Yet he makes no positive arguments for atheism.

## Responding To Specific Arguments Against Christianity

### 1. The Character Of Christ

Russell now moves to attacking Christianity itself. He begins with an off-handed comment that Christians do not really follow what Jesus said to do, like turning the other cheek.<sup>49</sup> To Russell, it sounds good, but try hitting a government official that claims to be a Christian and see if they turn the other cheek! But of course, the fact that people do not follow what they claim to believe is hardly grounds for rejecting the belief. Surely, Russell believes things that he has not consistently lived as well.

### 2. Defects In Christ's Teaching

In responding to specific Christian beliefs, Russell's most glaring weakness is that he expresses doubt over the existence of a historical Jesus. "Historically," declares Russell, "it is quite doubtful whether Christ ever existed at all, and if He did we do not know anything about him."<sup>50</sup> Russell presents this statement so causally that it is easy to gloss over it. But this is actually a shocking admission! No serious historian doubts the existence of the historical Jesus. While there are always those on the fringe of scholarship who insist on holding to the Christ Myth theory, New Testament and historical scholars, sacred and secular, vastly agree that Jesus existed and that this is one of the most assured facts of all of history. For example, leading New Testament critic Bart Ehrman, who is well known for criticizing the reliability of the Gospels and is himself an atheist, writes of Jesus, "He certainly existed, as virtually every competent scholar of antiquity, Christian or non-Christian, agrees."<sup>51</sup> He goes on to say, in an interview:

"I don't think there's any serious historian who doubts the existence of Jesus .... We have more evidence for Jesus than we have for almost anybody from his time period."<sup>52</sup>

Marcus Borg, another leading Bible critic and skeptic, has also written:

"Some judgments are so probable as to be certain; for example, Jesus really existed,

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ehrman, Bart. *Forged: Writing In The Name Of God*. HarperCollins, 2011. Pg 285.

<sup>52</sup> Ehrman, Bart. *Did Jesus Exist. An Interview By The Infidel Guy*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdqJyk-dtLs>

and he really was crucified, just as Julius Caesar really existed and was assassinated. .... We can in fact know as much about Jesus as we can about any figure in the ancient world.”<sup>53</sup>

This doubt places Russell well outside the camp of serious work on the person of Jesus.

But this is not all he has to say on the matter. For Russell, the bigger problem is that Jesus was obviously wrong about several things He taught. The prime example that Russell uses is that “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.”<sup>54</sup> He then quotes several passages that show Jesus predicting His return before the death of those listening. After all, if Jesus is wrongly predicting the future, how can He be God?

Once again, Russell brings up an issue that Christians have known about for centuries and he brings it up as if it were new. But in response to these so-called “failed prophecies,” several things need to be understood. First, there are several passages which indicate that Jesus believed the second coming was still far in the future. His Great Commission, which instructs His followers to “make disciples of all nations,”<sup>55</sup> would hardly have been possible in one lifetime.

Second, there were passages that only seemed to indicate His quick return, but were quickly clarified. When Peter asks what will happen to John, Jesus’ response, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you,”<sup>56</sup> was immediately misunderstood to teach that Jesus would return before John died, but John himself clarifies that this did not mean that he wouldn’t die, but that it was Jesus’ business what would happen, not Peter’s.

Third, while some passages, such as Jesus prediction that those who He was speaking to would not die until they see the Son of Man coming in glory,<sup>57</sup> seem to clearly indicate that Jesus believed He would come in that generation, this is not an accurate way of understanding these texts. The word “generation” is from a common Greek word meaning generation, but it can also mean race or family.<sup>58</sup> It is very plausible and probable that Jesus is saying that the race of people He is addressing, the Jews, will not pass away until His coming.

<sup>53</sup> Borg, Marcus. *The Meaning of Jesus: Two Visions*. HarperOne, 1999. Chapter 5.

<sup>54</sup> *Why I Am Not A Christian*.

<sup>55</sup> Matthew 28:19.

<sup>56</sup> John 21:22-23.

<sup>57</sup> Matthew 24:34.

<sup>58</sup> Ryrie, Charles Caldwell. *Ryrie Study Bible: Note On Matthew 24:34*. Moody Press, Chicago, Il, 1995, Pg. 1561.

### 3. The Moral Problem

Unlike many who see Jesus as a moral teacher, Russell takes issue with the content of His teaching. Of all Jesus’ teachings, the one that is most offensive to Russell is that Jesus believed in Hell. He writes:

“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.”<sup>59</sup>

To Russell, a person who believes others will suffer for their sins eternally does not deserve our adoration, but disdain. Yet, just earlier, he was criticizing the idea that certain things are morally right or wrong. If there is not real right and wrong, why is it wrong to believe someone will suffer? Russell stated that it was his “personal belief” that it was wrong. My personal belief is that the Denver Broncos are the greatest football team in history. Are these beliefs equal? If not, what makes one belief greater than another in a universe where 2.8 billion years from now the sun will die out completely and all living sacks of protoplasm will cease to exist?

Second, if someone were to rob Russell of his car or were to murder someone he loved, he would feel that such a person deserves to be punished. Why, if people sin against God, does God not deserve justice? One might suspect that it is because guilty parties always want to deny the innocent party of justice!

Third, if one were to ask why an eternal punishment is necessary, the response would be that the punishment has to fit the crime and there is a greater degree of punishment based upon what one does AND upon who one does it against. Punching a co-worker in the nose will have fewer consequences than punching the president. What kind of a punishment for sin should exist for creatures who have rebelled and pushed away an eternally good, loving, holy, and just God? It turns out that Russell denies to God the basic principles of justice that he himself would afford himself if he were wronged.

### 4. The Emotional Factor, How Churches Have Retarded Progress, And Fear, The Foundation Of Religion.

Russell here begins a sustained argument that begins under one heading but continues through two others. For Russell, Christians accept Christianity, not on the ground of evidence, but on the ground of emotion. He goes back to an earlier theme but does so at a new angle, stating, “As I said before, I do not

<sup>59</sup> *Why I Am Not A Christian*.

think that the real reason why people accept religion has anything to do with argumentation. They accept religion on emotional grounds.”<sup>60</sup> Again, he argues toward the end of the paper that:

“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 older 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.”<sup>61</sup>

Yet, once more, what does that have to do with the truth or false reality of Christianity? Russell’s broken record refuses to stop playing. Even if fear were the motivation for belief, it does not follow that the belief is wrong. I love my wife for emotional reasons, not because I weighed the pros and cons of loving. This argument against Christianity does nothing to argue against the validity of its claims.

But taking this a step farther, Russell must believe that he himself is God. After all, how else would Russell be able to judge the heart and intent of those who believe in Christianity? Does he have some way to know why every person has come to believe? Russell goes too far in assigning this motive to all religious faith. What of the testimonies of men like Lee Strobel, Simon Greenleaf, Alister McGrath, John Warrick Montgomery, or C.S. Lewis, all of whom were convinced against their will that theism was true? Lewis himself writes:

“You must picture me alone in that room at Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”<sup>62</sup>

After this brief argument, He writes, “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.”<sup>63</sup> For the rest of the essay, Russell complains about the way Christians have impeded human progress by its “insistence upon what it calls morality,” and have inflicted “upon all

sorts of people undeserved and unnecessary suffering.”<sup>64</sup> Russell includes one particular example:

“Supposing that...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.”<sup>65</sup>

Once again, it must be asked how Russell can argue that such a thing is immoral when he does not seem to believe in objective right and wrong? In truth, he is insisting on what he calls morality to condemn others for insisting on what they call morality! He later writes:

“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.”<sup>66</sup>

Of course, science can do no such thing. Science can tell us that by stabbing someone in the heart, their body will die. But science cannot tell whether or not one ought to stab someone in the heart.

But this is not where the issue stops. While some groups, such as the Catholics and various Christians, have insisted that all forms of birth control are against biblical law, this is simply not the case and thus cannot be reason to condemn Christian morality.

Further, the insistence upon not divorcing by Christians is not about what is being denied but about what is being encouraged. Christians believe that God works through suffering and so, while escape is not always wrong, it is far more important to be an instrument of God in suffering than it is to escape from it.<sup>67</sup>

In spite of Russell’s protests against Christian morality, Christians have done much good. They have started hospitals and soup kitchens, working within systems to alleviate suffering in many ways. One struggles to think of a any endeavor, done in the

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Beloved Works Of C.S. Lewis: Surprised By Joy*. Inspirational Press, New York, NY. Pg. 125.

<sup>63</sup> *Why I Am Not A Christian*.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> See Romans 8:28-29; 1 Corinthians 7:12-16; Philippians 1-2

name of atheism, aimed at alleviating suffering. It is much easier to think of regimes that were overtly atheistic that killed millions of people.

### The Real Issue For Russell

When all is said and done, Russell's critique of the Christian arguments fails to cast any doubt upon the validity of such arguments. But, for Russell, there is a greater problem. Imagine a debate in which one of the debaters is arguing that air does not exist. With every scientific argument for air proposed, the a-airist counters with a rebuttal. With every personal testimony of air proposed, the a-airist suggests a reason to doubt the credibility of the testifier. And with every book detailing the nature of air proposed, the a-airist gives a book supporting his view. Finally, someone in the crowd yells, "But you're breathing air right now to make your case!"

Russell is arguing that God does not exist but he cannot do so on the basis of his own principles. In his materialistic universe where all things are matter, there is no reason to believe that we as humans even have the ability to think rationally or to trust the thoughts of our mind. C.S. Lewis states:

"If the solar system was brought about by an accidental collision, then the appearance of organic life on this planet was also an accident, and the whole evolution of Man was an accident too. If so, then all our present thoughts are mere accidents - the accidental by-product of the movement of atoms. And this holds for the thoughts of the materialists and astronomers as well as for anyone else's. But if their thoughts - i.e., Materialism and Astronomy - are mere accidental by-products, why should we believe them to be true? I see no reason for believing that one accident should be able to give me a correct account of all the other accidents. It's like expecting the accidental shape taken by the splash when you upset a milk-jug should give you a correct account of how the jug was made and why it was upset."<sup>68</sup>

Lest someone object because Lewis was a Christian and biased against evolution, Charles Darwin himself understood the dilemma:

"With me the horrid doubt always arises whether the convictions of man's mind, which has been developed from the mind of the lower animals, are of any value or at all trustworthy. Would anyone trust in the

convictions of a monkey's mind, if there are any convictions in such a mind?"<sup>69</sup>

But Russell still believes that he is capable of rational thought, and he is! He is because, whether he likes it or not, Christianity is true. He is made in the image of God and is capable of understanding the world around him because his Creator is a rational and intelligent Being. Yet his own worldview is incapable of accounting for his ability to argue rationally. Thus, before Russell can even begin to argue, he has lost. Russell's position of atheism is not a position of intellectual superiority, but of a man rebelling against his nature as a creature of God in the hopes to free himself from obligation to his Creator.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Lewis, C.S. *The Business of Heaven*, Fount Paperbacks, U.K., 1984. Pg. 97.

<sup>69</sup> Darwin, Charles. *Darwin Correspondence Project* — Letter 13230 — Darwin, C. R. to Graham, William, 3 July 1881.

<sup>70</sup> Romans 1:16-32