

RETHINKING SOME OF THE REASONING IN RUSSELL'S "WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN"

Bertrand Russell made many objections to Christ and Christianity in his paper Why I am not a Christian.

Russell objects to the doctrine that there is a lot of unfairness and injustice in the world and that some day maybe in the next life God will rectify this and give justice to all.

He states "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."

This is said to be a false analogy. God is working with people not oranges and they abuse their free will. The evil that happens in one place could well be balanced out by the good God does elsewhere in the universe or he might bring a wonderful good out of it.

The argument would work if we did not have free will. But think of it this way, the huge majority of creatures such as animals do not. Our free will is only a small thing in this mix. We will leave aside the notion that we do not actually have free will. It is known that free will is tormented with limitations. Russell is right but he just needed to be clearer. It is actually evil to use free will to get out of the argument.

“What really moves people to believe in God is not any intellectual argument at all. “

This is an ad hominem fallacy and a false generalisation. It is meant to accuse all believers of being stupid. It underestimates how good theologians can be at lying. It is true of many believers but not all.

“As I said before, I do not think that the real reason that people accept religion has anything to do with argumentation. They accept religion on emotional grounds.”

These arguments are an ad hominem arguments and rash generalisations. Even if belief in God is ridiculous it does not follow that believers necessarily believe in God without intellectual arguments. Anybody can believe because of an inadequate argument.

“One is often told that it is a very wrong thing to attack religion, because religion makes men virtuous. ..That is the idea -- that we should all be wicked if we did not hold to the Christian religion. “

Jesus himself criticised religion as it deserved. The "true" Church of his day was Judaism but that did not stop him telling the truth about itself. Jesus implied that no Church should get away with doctrines or behaviour that undermine the truth revealed by God and the paths of righteousness. Jesus was clearly well aware that religion does not need to worship statues to become idolatrous. Sometimes religion itself can be idolatry when it stands proud and arrogant and admires itself rather than God.

Not all believers hold that non-Christians are wicked in the sense that they are like wild beasts or demons.

“You find as you look around the world that every single bit of progress of 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 ever 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.”

The Christians say that the scriptures never command that we must like war, abuse other races, keep slavery going etc. They lie - the Bible God does command unnecessary violence.

Some believers say that if all Christians are bad that does not mean that the faith itself is bad. It only means its being disobeyed.

But surely if the faith came from God and God changes lives their argument is wrong?

Russell claims that the Church teaches, "What has human happiness to do with morals? The object of morals is not to make

people happy."

It is said that he is using a straw man approach. He wants to present Christianity as a grim and unattractive faith. Some say that Christianity teaches that there is good happiness and dangerous happiness. So happiness in itself is not good. It is only good when it is based on virtue. So it means that the Christian would rather you were severely depressed and virtuous than have you happy but lacking in virtue.

The Church says that you should be prepared to give all to God forever. If you sacrifice everlasting happiness in order to please God forever, then happiness is less important than virtue.

"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."

Reason tells us to get to know people before we try to love them. It might make you virtuous to love a person you don't know but who you think you know. It might make you happy. God by definition demands all our love and as he is the ultimate source of good we must love others only for his sake - we love him through them. It is extreme cruelty though it may not look like it to encourage people to love a God who does not exist. What adds to the outrage is how people speculate that God is right to allow terrible things to happen to people. If your love for God is evil, then your approving of him despite his allowing evil to happen, makes you evil. In fact, we should be afraid of believing in God instead of believing in him out of fear. Fear has to be at the bottom of belief in God. As fear is largely illogical, it is no surprise if belief in God is illogical and incoherent.

"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 the help of science, which has forced its way step by step against the Christian religion, against the churches, and against the opposition of all the old precepts. "

Russell assumes that all Christians only accept Christianity because it helps them deal with their fears. This is said by Christians and others to be true of some believers but not all. But do the happy Christians really understand their faith? How Christian are they?

Some say, "The author of 1 John wrote that the perfect love of God takes away all fear. The Christian can be free of fear and enjoy his faith." But this is hypothetical - he said the perfect love of God casts out all fear but he is clear as were the rest of the New Testament authors that nobody loves God perfectly.

Russell is said to be ignoring the fact that many nonbelievers are in the grip of fear. Believers say, "The atheist can be terrified of suffering and death. The atheist philosophy robs its followers of a sense of the presence of God. They are left without a sense of a God who is with them in their suffering. Christians are not promised freedom from suffering in this life but freedom from feeling totally abandoned."

But people, Christians and atheists, both can feel totally abandoned. Our emotions and our depressions are not necessarily logical or realistic. We can feel 100% abandoned though we are not. Being reminded that we are not can make our pain worse. It is understandable that people may remind us, but to encourage them to believe in a God who is with them is downright cruel.

Christianity has no right to promise people that it will benefit them. The people who suffer most are those who are in the depths of depression. Christianity lets them down and no benefits or alleged benefits that it gives to other people can justify what it does to the profoundly depressed.

Fear is the parent of cruelty. Religion is based on fear and dangerous - it should be abandoned.

"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 fit place to live in, instead of the sort of place that the churches in all these centuries have made it."

Russell assumes that science and Christian faith are necessarily in opposition. Christians say this is false. They say, "If God created the universe and is the author of the Bible then there is no necessary contradiction between science and faith. Sometimes we think there is conflict but if we wait and keep researching we will find that the conflict gets resolved." In reality, we should be more interested in science than faith. If we refuse to accept science when it contradicts faith, we are putting faith first. If it turns out the science is wrong, the fact remains that we still value it less than faith. To devalue

science is to devalue the methodology of science which is, "Do not believe anything, unless the evidence says it is true. Be prepared to change your mind." Faith cannot compare to that at all.