

WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN BY RUSSELL EXPOSES JESUS

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

He wrote, "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."

Russell commits the fallacy of rash generalisation. Just because some bishops and Church leaders oppose the Christian doctrine of Hell he assumes it is not binding on anybody to believe it.

The error here is in assuming that it is up to bishops and ecclesiastics to decide what is to be believed by Christians. Russell should have remembered that bishops and ecclesiastics may just as easily mutilate and try to misrepresent the teaching of Christ as they can propound it accurately. To be a Christian one must accept the teaching of Jesus Christ. People who are described as Christian leaders quite frequently lead their flocks astray. If Jesus said there is a Hell, then the Christians who considers the doctrine optional is not a true Christian. He or she follows a semblance of Christianity.

Russell hints that Christianity is not revealed by God but is merely based on human opinion. Some say that is the straw man approach. It accuses the faith of being purely human but masquerading as divine. But they are setting up a straw man unless they can give good evidence that he is wrong.

"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, 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."

None of the above is relevant to proving Christ unwise. Russell seems to want us to think that because some of Jesus' teaching was similar to other religious figures that he was stupid. Again an ad hominem attack for if Jesus had borrowed that would not mean he was unwise. Wise men do learn from one another.

He argues:

Christ's teaching on turn the other cheek is stupid so Christians do not accept it and Christians do not accept it because it is stupid. A circular argument.

Russell wrote: "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." He says this teaching is unrealistic and stupid.

But many people who call themselves Christians are fond of quoting Jesus out of context in order to spread liberalism and indifference to immorality. What Jesus actually meant was that you must not judge others unless you judge yourself first. The context speaks of seeing the mote in the eye of another while there is a plank in your own eye. Jesus' teaching is not unrealistic at all. It urges realistic and unbiased judgement.

Russell thinks that Jesus 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 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 the second coming was going to be very soon, and that all ordinary mundane

affairs did not count. “

Christians say that none of the texts he cites indicates that Jesus meant a coming where he would come in glory and power to take over the world. They say Russell takes Jesus out of context. But they are twisting Jesus' words. There was no other coming referred to in the Bible but the coming of Jesus as man and as son of man in glory to reign over the world. They say Russell is using the argument from ignorance for he incorrectly surmises that the lack of evidence that Jesus meant his second coming means that he did mean it. Jesus is being presumed guilty until proven innocent.

The believers might say I am forgetting that Jesus left us at the crucifixion and came back to us and returned in the resurrection three days later. This was fulfilled they say. But that is a rationalisation - Jesus rising from the dead and making a few brief appearances is not much of a coming.

Russell implies that any person who believes in Hell is not a good person: “I do not myself feel that any person that is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting Punishment.”

Is that an ad hominem attack? It would seem that even if the doctrine were evil, there would be many good people who have not thought the doctrine through and taken it for granted as compatible with God's love in some way they have not heard about or can't understand. But if good people thought it was okay to rape a child would you make such an excuse?

Signing up to a faith that requires the belief is worse than actually believing it.

“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.”

Christians say that Russell is setting Jesus up as a straw man here. "Jesus' fury was not vindictive but reflected the very real danger of Hell. He was warning people for their own good. Are you vindictive if you shout furiously at somebody to get out of a burning house?" If it was not vindictive but just real tough love, then why are the Christians not showing this love themselves?

To argue that it is vindictive to preach about Hell and since Jesus preached about Hell he was vindictive, is thought to be a circular argument. Christians think that. But it is not.

Russell writes, “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.”

Christians say, "He is using the example of people who suffered because they did not understand the Bible. They did not understand that Jesus merely meant the blasphemy of hardening one's heart so much that one would never repent and respond to the grace of the Holy Spirit. Those who commit the sin do not worry about having committed it for they are too blind to see how sinful they are."

But they presuppose that the people referred to by Jesus as being guilty of the eternal sin were 100% hardened. Nobody is. What you have is people who are hard enough not to let their better nature through. Of course the doctrine of the eternal sin will torment them.

Of the warning about hell and punishment from God, Russell writes, “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. “

That might seem as illogical as saying that a person becomes an executioner because he likes killing people! Not necessarily. If all Christians vindictively enjoyed the thought of people going to Hell that still would not refute the gospels. But if the gospels are fond of the doctrine we can question the right of the authors to be seen as penning the word of a loving God.

“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. “

Christians say that the gospel does not say that Jesus was to blame for what the pigs did. He put the demons into the pigs but the demons were so evil and furious they accidentally drove the pigs to suicide. They say that the divine purpose in this

miracle was to show how dangerous demons are and to get it across that demons and the inhabitants of Hell are insane.

The argument is presented in the context of claiming that Jesus was not the perfect man. Russell is accused of using an ad hominem attack on Jesus. The Christians say the story is not relevant to proving Jesus bad because it does not say Jesus was to blame for what happened to the pigs.

But if Jesus puts demented demons into pigs what does he expect? Russell is right.

Christians ignore that and say that Russell is guilty of the False Dilemma fallacy:

Jesus killed the pigs.

Only a bad person would do that.

Therefore Jesus was bad.

The Christians say that the argument is like saying a dentist is evil for hurting his patient to help him. They say, "Even if Jesus had seemingly being cruel to the pigs, if we knew the reasons why he acted as he did we might have a different perception. God knows more than we do and we must not presume to know that his actions are not justified." That is mere rationalisation. If Jesus does what seems bad to us, we have a right to know why. And especially when he says he is to be adored as God.

Russell attacks the story of Jesus looking for food on a fig tree and cursing it for there was nothing on it. The curse killed it. "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."

Christians without any justification rationalise this as follows, "Russell forgets that Jesus preferred to teach the people through symbols and parables. The fig tree was a parable he acted out. The point of the episode was to show that God would not accept whoever had the potential to bear fruit but failed to. What about the fact that it was not the time of year for figs? That doesn't matter for Jesus had the power to make figs appear on it but didn't. He still illustrated his point."