

# Why Bertrand Russell Was Not A Christian

by

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## Preface

Bertrand Russell was probably the most sophisticated and eloquent spokesman for atheism in this century. No one can doubt his credentials as a philosopher. Nor can anyone doubt that a winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature had a talent for communication. The philosophical brilliance and superb communicative skills evident in his writings guarantee that Russell's influence will continue for some time to come. That is why I thought it worthwhile to provide a Christian critique of Russell's essay "Why I Am Not a Christian," even though it is based upon a speech given in 1927.

Some time after writing the first draft of this essay, while searching through my apologetics files, I ran across an article by Greg Bahnsen that refutes Russell's essay. My revision has been helped by Bahnsen's article, but even my first draft was largely dependent on Bahnsen's tape cassette classes on apologetics. Following Van Til, Bahnsen's tape cassette courses set forth an apologetic approach that aims to prove Christianity the necessary presupposition for human knowledge. I have attempted in the following essay to apply that approach. The reader will have to decide whether or not I have been faithful to Van Til's approach, and whether or not that approach accomplishes what it claims.

## Introduction

At the Battersea Town Hall on March 27, 1927, sponsored by the National Secular Society, Bertrand Russell delivered the famous lecture entitled "Why I Am Not a Christian." Together with other lectures about religion, it was published in a book of the same title in 1957 with a preface by Russell assuring his readers that he had not changed his opinions. He believes that Christianity, along with every other religion, is both untrue and harmful. Furthermore, in Russell's opinion the teaching of religion to children inhibits their ability to think clearly and to cooperate with others whose beliefs differ from theirs. Far from being the source of great contributions to the civilizations of the world, religion has done nothing more than help fix the calendar and provoke Egyptian priests to chronicle eclipses. In Russell's words, "These two services I am prepared to acknowledge, but I do not know of any others." In short, Russell took as dim a view of religion as one can take and he claimed to have good philosophical reasons for doing so.

It should be pointed out in passing that Russell's pontifications about history have all the characteristics of the dogmatic religious narrowness and bigoted ignorance that he professed to loathe. No historian, Christian or non-Christian, would ever make the kind of simplistic assertions that Russell made. Nor should any well-read high school student be without the knowledge to refute them. How can a man of Russell's intellectual stature and education express such utter nonsense? The answer may be that Russell is to some atheists what the fundamentalist preacher is to uneducated Christians. What he provides for his followers in the National Secular Society is not enlightenment, but emotional support, a goal that, in cases where factual and logical proof are insufficient or not understood, can best be achieved by extreme rhetoric.

### *Russell's Approach*

Setting aside Russell's remarkable views on history, we return to his

reasons for rejecting Christianity. First, Russell tells us that we must define what it means to be a Christian. He is surely correct in asserting that it used to be very clear what a Christian believes, but that Christianity nowadays is rather vague. He apparently assumed that his audience would be more likely to run into the modern murky mentality and therefore chose to refute the less vigorous form of Christianity. Having defined what he means by Christianity, next Russell offers two main arguments against Christianity. First, he contends that the traditional Catholic arguments for the existence of God are inadequate. Second, he maintains that Christ was not the best and wisest of men. Either argument, if established, refutes Christianity. If God does not exist, or if Christ is inferior to, say, Socrates or the Buddha, then Christianity is not true.

As I will explain, a Christian may, in one sense, grant Russell's argument about the existence of God. Traditional Catholic arguments for the existence of God are deficient. Though the reader of his lecture may not be able to escape the impression that Russell is rather too cavalier in his dismissal of arguments that have occupied the greatest minds in Western history, the points that he makes are cogent enough, at least against the weak form of the theistic arguments he presents. Even more carefully stated presentations of the traditional arguments suffer from defects similar to those that Russell mentions.

As to Christ, Russell should have stated his case with much more vigor. If indeed Christ was mistaken on all of the matters Russell claims he was mistaken, then he was no great man at all. He was just another ancient religious quack whose name is better forgotten, whose sound ideas may be found in countless other thinkers.

But, as we will demonstrate, Russell's arguments fail. In the final analysis Russell gives us nothing more than an expression of his own irrational bias, an idea about the world which, if it were true, would obviate the very possibility of knowledge and ethics. I argue that without the Christianity he hates, Russell cannot formulate an argument for or against anything.

## Chapter One: Responding to Russell on God

### *Russell's Arguments against God's Existence*

Russell briefly explains and then refutes in order the following five arguments for the existence of God: 1) the first cause argument, 2) the natural law argument, 3) the argument from design, 4) the moral argument, 5) the argument for the remedying of injustice. As I said above, he has not chosen to refute the best forms of these arguments, but a man of Russell's ability should be able to respond effectively even to the most sophisticated presentations, for the proponents of these arguments do not usually regard them as airtight proofs. These arguments are merely said to point to the probability of God's existence or the reasonableness of faith in God.

Russell's five arguments belong to three basic types of arguments for the existence of God: cosmological, teleological, and moral. Cosmological arguments argue that the universe must have been caused and that the cause is most likely God. Teleological arguments argue that the order men observe in the world cannot be accidental and, therefore, suggests design by God. Moral arguments come in various types. Russell deals with two, one which contends that God must be the source of moral standards and the other which argues that the moral injustice of history must be rectified by a post-historical judgment.

Russell's objections to the traditional arguments are neither original nor particularly profoundly stated. Concerning the cosmological type of argument Russell states, in essence, that if Christians can believe in a God who needs no cause, he can believe in a universe that needs no cause. To the teleological arguments he answers that the world does not need a law-giver to have laws, nor is the order in the world impressive when one considers the problem of evil. Moral arguments fail too, in Russell's opinion, because there must be a standard for good and evil apart from God in

order to affirm God's goodness, but if there is such a standard, then men do not need God for morality, but the standard itself. Russell could have added that even if the traditional arguments for God were accepted, they would only demonstrate the probability of the existence of some kind of a god, which is still a long way from proving the existence of the Triune Personal God of Christianity.

Finally, in a concluding argument against Christianity, Russell asserts "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." He adds a second reason, "the wish for safety, a sort of feeling that there is a big brother who will look after you." Again, he writes near the end of the essay, "Religion is based, I think, primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly 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." According to Russell, then — and this seems to be the most important point actually — belief in God is not a rational enterprise. People believe out of habit or fear, but they have no adequate intellectual basis for their faith.

### *Traditional Approach Wrong*

What should a Christian say to all this? In the first place, we should admit that the traditional approach is wrong. Christians should not be attempting to prove the existence of God to unbelievers as if both Christians and non-Christians alike could address this question from a neutral perspective. In the nature of the case, intellectual discussions about God are not ethically neutral. Ironically, there is a sense in which Russell himself seems to understand this point better than some Christians. He suggests that Christians are irrational in their faith, believing, as it were, in spite of

better knowledge. In Russell's view something other than the strictly intellectual issues, either fear or a desire for security, determines the Christian's faith.

But this is precisely what the Bible teaches about the unbeliever. According to the Bible, the unbeliever is not intellectually neutral and objective. He is irrational, unbelieving in spite of better knowledge. In his heart he knows that God exists, but he rejects Christianity out of fear, especially the fear of death which is ultimately a fear that God will judge his sins. For the unbeliever, eliminating God from the world is the way to obtain security. Arguments against God are motivated by the unbeliever's wish to believe that he is ethically normal and that the apparent unfriendliness of the universe, summed up in the inescapable fact of death, is not a testimony against his sins. Terrified of death, the non-Christian seeks to justify himself in the face of it, some denying that it has any special meaning, others asserting that it will be a wonderful experience. All of this manifests what the Bible is speaking of when it says that sinful man hates God (Rom. 8:7).

When, therefore, a Christian argues with an unbeliever about the existence of God, he is not engaging in a neutral discussion. From the unbeliever's perspective it is more like a personal attack. From the Christian's perspective it is seeking the salvation of a man who is blind and lost. Neither side is or can be neutral, so the traditional approach to apologetics, insofar as it assumes or recommends neutrality, cannot honestly represent the Christian position.

### *Indirect Approach to Answer Russell*

What about Russell's denial of God's existence? Russell's arguments do not stand. It can be demonstrated that Russell's approach is fundamentally irrational, evidence that the Biblical description of the unbeliever is accurate. Russell does not reject Christianity for neutral philosophical reasons. He rejects Christianity out of fear. To demonstrate the truth of this assertion requires what might be called an indirect approach. We have to ask the question, if Christianity is untrue, and all the other religions of the world



are also untrue, what is the alternative? If Russell has chosen to reject Christianity, it is presumably because he has found something better. At least he has found some substitute worldview. What was it?

We find the answer, at least in part, in another essay in the same volume entitled "A Free Man's Worship." Russell informs us that science teaches us of a purposeless world, void of meaning:

That man is the product of causes which had no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but the outcome of accidental collocations of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can preserve an individual life beyond the grave; that all the labors of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins — all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's salvation henceforth be safely built.

This is a bleak image, but, as he hinted in the pregnant words "soul's salvation," Russell finds hope, and in so doing betrays a Christian hangover. In the paragraph immediately following the above quotation, unyielding despair yields:

A strange mystery it is that nature, omnipotent but blind, in the revolutions of her secular hurrying through the abysses of space, has brought forth at last a child, subject still to her power, but gifted with sight, with knowledge of good and evil,

with the capacity of judging all the works of his unthinking mother. In spite of death, the mark and seal of the parental control, man is yet free, during his brief years, to examine, to criticize, to know, and in imagination to create. To him alone, in the world with which he is acquainted, this freedom belongs; and in this lies his superiority to the resistless forces that control his outward life.

Having rejected God and posited a blind, omnipotent mother-nature, Russell blithely assumes that he can somehow from this “firm foundation of unyielding despair” infer knowledge, morality, and freedom. Readers must assume that the adjective “omnipotent” is used here by way of hyperbole, since he has not demonstrated that nature must be all-powerful. But one cannot simply allow him to speak of “nature.” What actually does he mean by “nature”? The answer would seem to be brute forces. But brute forces could be the forces of an utterly irrational universe of chance, or the forces of a deterministic system.

How did Russell conceive of it? In the essay “What I Believe,” written in 1925, Russell wrote “Man is part of nature, not something contrasted with nature. His thoughts and his bodily movements follow the same laws that describe the motions of stars and atoms.”

Mother nature appears to be Mama machine. If that is the case, the one thing that neither man nor any other being has is freedom. Mechanical necessity rules all. Not having freedom, man’s so-called knowledge would be nothing more than chemical reactions in the brain, inevitable as the “laws that describe the motions of stars and atoms” and devoid of meaning. Good and evil would be words that men use because something in their brains has triggered them to think and speak in such terms, but ethical words could have no real content.

Russell gives us, in other words, a world that is not only without God, but one which logically excludes the possibility of rational knowledge, ethics, and freedom, a world in which “nature” itself obviates the existence of the

kind of free man he wishes to believe in. The bare assertion that knowledge, ethics, and freedom exist cannot bring them into being, except in Russell's fervid imagination. Mama machine can only give birth to baby machines.

If, to escape this problem, one should seek to find comfort in a world of chance, another view of the world suggested by Russell, he is not actually helped at all. Chance knows nothing of reason, ethics, or freedom. Randomness — the “liberty” of spastic convulsion — is the closest a world of chance can possibly come to the idea of freedom, but randomness is inexplicable by definition. It precludes reason. And in a world without logic or reason, good and evil cannot exist.

Thus, whether Russell chooses a deterministic mechanical view of the universe or a chance view of the universe, he has no right to proceed beyond the foundation of despair to find salvation in a free man's worship. His vision of the free man is a religious delusion, a desperate dream to comfort those not brave enough to face real despair. His confession of faith, then, is the epitome of fanaticism:

[T]o worship at the shrine that his own hands have built; undismayed by the empire of chance, to preserve a mind free from the wanton tyranny that rules his outward life; proudly defiant of the irresistible forces that tolerate, for a moment, his knowledge and his condemnation, to sustain alone, a weary but unyielding Atlas, the world that his own ideals have fashioned despite the trampling march of unconscious power.

The sum of the matter is, then, that Russell rejects the Christian view of the world and offers in its place an irrational view of his own making that is no less religious than Christianity. Assuming his existence to be meaningless, momentary and under the sway of the irresistible forces of either the empire of chance or that of mechanical necessity, he maintains that he is “a weary but unyielding Atlas.” But there is not the least basis for this faith in all his metaphysics, which, if he followed with full seriousness,

would lead him to a total denial of the possibility of meaningful knowledge. Russell, however, chooses not to be consistent with his view of the world. Though his metaphysics logically debars the human dignity Russell craves, he fervently believes anyway.

### *Conclusion*

We must conclude that Russell's view of the world is irrational. A world that is ultimately ruled either by chance or deterministic law is a world in which the idea of knowledge is unintelligible. It is clear, then, as we asserted above, that Russell does not hold on to this faith for intellectual reasons. It has been suggested, and will be argued further in the next chapter, that Russell's real motivation is fear of God's judgment.

Concerning the philosophical argument against Christianity, it must be admitted that on Russell's presuppositions Christianity is untrue. This is not a particular problem, however, because on his presuppositions, his own philosophy is also untrue. If Russell's presuppositions reduce his own philosophy to absurdity, they cannot be used to deny Christianity.

What our indirect approach has demonstrated is that Russell makes demands on Christianity that cannot be fulfilled by his own alternative either. What he does is typical of non-Christian philosophy in general. The unbeliever demands that God meet his impossible conditions — impossible due to limitations in man and impossible because they contradict the nature of God and reality — and then has the audacity to claim that God fails. But his own inability to provide a rational alternative resoundingly speaks the hidden truth that Russell is a rebel, that his pretended intellectual neutrality is a sham, that his reasoning is controlled by a perverse self interest. This, the real reason that Russell was not a Christian, does not argue against Christianity. Just the opposite — the facts that Russell in attempting to philosophically disprove Christianity is unable to provide a logical alternative, and that he actually conforms to the Christian description of man, serve, rather, as an indirect argument for the truth of Christianity.

## Chapter Two: Responding to Russell on Christ

As we saw in the introduction, Russell's basic criticism of Christianity is twofold. First, he denies the existence of the Christian God, then he turns to the question, Was Christ the best and wisest of men? He answers, no. Christ, in his opinion, was a good man, but there were others who were wiser and better. Russell claims to find defects in Christ's teaching and character that prove Jesus not to be the man Christians believe Him to be. If Russell's arguments were true, Christianity would be false.

In order for Russell's argument to be true, however, certain conditions must be met. He must have a moral standard by which he may judge Christ and find Him either to be or not to be perfect. If Russell's philosophy cannot provide a moral standard, then nothing can be argued about Christ's character, one way or the other. Russell also must be accurately representing Christ's teaching and character before he can criticize them. Russell fails on both of these points. A third requirement for moral criticism may be added, namely, that the man who presumes to be a moral critic must himself be moral. In this matter, too, Russell fails miserably.

But first, a short digression to consider Russell's surprising views of history is necessary. Russell tells us that his argument against Christ is concerned only with Christ as He appears in the Gospels, because the historical question is so difficult: "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 difficult one." Now, there are difficult historical questions, but the existence of Christ is not one of them. We are confronted once more with a remarkably odd view of history, an oddness that is compounded by the fact that Russell goes on to criticize the views of this man whom he says probably never lived. Why didn't Russell just present the conclusive arguments that prove Jesus never lived? It is hard not to suspect that he knew better.

### *Defects in Christ's Teaching?*

The subtitle here is taken directly from Russell, except for the question mark. Since Russell spoke of "defects," plural, one expects to find numerous defects pointed out, but this subheading ends with only one defect having been discussed. That defect is that Christ, according to Russell, taught that He would return to the world "in clouds of glory before the death of all the people who were living at that time." If that is what Christ taught, it would be a defect indeed. But Christ did not teach what Russell says He taught.

If Russell understood Jesus' teaching properly, he would have, perhaps, found it even more offensive, for these verses speak of God's coming judgment against the nation of Israel. The passages that Russell refers to have often been misunderstood by well-meaning but Biblically under-educated Christians who take Jesus' words in a woodenly literalistic fashion. Jesus did speak of "coming on the clouds," but His words are an allusion to Old Testament passages about God bringing judgment upon nations, usually through the armies of their enemies (Is. 19:1; Ps. 104:3-4; etc.). What Jesus was speaking of in Matthew 24 was the impending judgment on Jerusalem, a prophecy that was fulfilled in terrifying detail in A.D. 70. What Russell refers to as a defect was actually a demonstration of the supernatural character of Christ's teaching.

### *Defect in Christ's Character?*

According to Russell, "There is one very serious defect . . . 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." It is not just that Jesus believed in hell as a factually existing place, Russell is also offended with Jesus' tone, which he calls "vindictive fury against those people who would not listen to His preaching . . . ." That Jesus lacks the "proper degree of kindness in his nature" is also demonstrated by His teaching that whoever sinned against the Holy Spirit could not be forgiven, a teaching that puts "fears and terrors" into the world. Jesus'

repeated references to hell-fire and punishment are to be held responsible for “generations of cruel torture.”

As before, it must be granted that theoretically Russell could be correct, but only on certain conditions. If hell does not in fact exist, then Jesus’ teaching about hell may be regarded as a pernicious error. Moreover, if Jesus is not who He claimed to be, it would be more than a little improper for Him to be filled with indignation when men rejected His teaching. On the other hand, we have to ask what Russell did not ask — what if hell really does exist and Jesus really is the Son of God? If hell really exists, Jesus’ teaching about hell is not offensive, it is truthful and courageous, for no one likes to hear about hell. And if He is the Son of God, His moral outrage at men’s rejection of His teaching is most holy and proper.

In other words, Russell’s criticisms of Jesus presuppose what they are trying to prove. Only if Russell knows that Jesus is not the Son of God — the very point under debate — do Russell’s criticisms stand as criticisms. Russell is assuming what he has to prove, which means that his assertions are arbitrary. As a philosophical argument, Russell’s criticisms of Christ’s moral character do not stand. It is hard to believe that Russell himself could have been ignorant of the circular nature of his argument. In any case, he was clearly speaking more as a cheerleader for the National Secular Society than a serious philosopher.

### *Russell’s Philosophical Moral Problem*

Apart from the fact that Russell has misunderstood Jesus’ teaching, and presupposed what he was trying to prove, he actually faces a much more difficult and fundamental problem. For Russell to be able to judge whether Christ is moral or not, he must believe that there are moral standards which apply equally to Christ and to men of our day. There is no question about the fact that Russell wished to believe that there are moral standards, at least in some sense, for he repeatedly — even passionately, religiously — speaks of goodness and love throughout his essays. In the essay “A Free Man’s Worship,” for example, Russell gushes:

If power is bad, as it seems to be, let us reject it from our hearts. In this lies man's true freedom: in determination to worship only the God created by our own love of the good, to respect only the heaven which inspires the insight of our best moments. In action, in desire, we must submit perpetually to the tyranny of outside forces; but in thought, in aspiration, we are free, free from our fellow men, free from the petty planet on which our bodies impotently crawl, free even, while we live, from the tyranny of death. Let us learn, then, that energy of faith which enables us to live constantly in the vision of the good; and let us descend, in action, into the world of fact, with that vision always before us.

If it seems that Russell is self-consciously advocating a commitment to the idea of good, even though we know that it is only an idea, a figment of the imagination, that is because he believes that good is a human creation. For Russell the philosophy of value and the philosophy of nature, as he calls them, are two unrelated, fundamentally different disciplines, as he explains in "What I Believe":

Optimism and pessimism, as cosmic philosophies, show the same naïve humanism; the great world, so far as we know it from the philosophy of nature, is neither good nor bad, and is not concerned to make us happy or unhappy. All such philosophies spring from self-importance and are best corrected by a little astronomy.

But in the philosophy of value the situation is reversed. Nature is only a part of what we can imagine; everything, real or imagined, can be appraised by us, and there is no outside standard to show that our valuation is wrong. We are ourselves the ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value, and in the world of value nature is only a part. Thus in this world we are greater than nature. In the world of values, nature in itself is neutral, neither good nor bad, deserving of neither admiration nor censure. It is we who create value and our desires which confer value.



In this realm we are kings, and we debase our kingship if we bow down to nature. It is for us to determine the good life, not for nature — not even for nature personified as God.

It is unquestionable that on Russell's view of the universe, either optimism or pessimism is naive, for man is a cosmic accident whose feelings and future can have no ultimate meaning. It is equally beyond doubt that ethics in this view are purely arbitrary. But Russell, not content with meaninglessness, borrows the language of religion and politics and ardently asserts man's authority. All men are kings, "ultimate and irrefutable arbiters" of good and evil, who create value by their mere wish and word.

How is it possible for people who live in the world of nature to create values that have any real meaning? If God's creation of the world must be ridiculed as a dream and a myth resorted to by men who do not have the courage to face the real world, how much more is the idea of man's creation of value a pathetic crutch, chosen only by those who cannot see that man is nothing but a self-conscious animal. In Russell's world force may be applied by those in power to maintain the order they decree, but nothing else is meaningful in the realm of value. It is not "we" who are kings. It is those men with the power to impose their will on others who are kings. Russell imagines a world in which no one bows the knee to the God of the Bible, but he naively imagines that there would be no bowing at all.

He also seems to imagine that if all men were kings, they would magically agree on what constitutes right and wrong. Russell himself, again suffering from a Christian hangover that he does not seem to be conscious of, pontificates: "In a perfect world, every sentient being would be to every other the object of the fullest love, compounded of delight, benevolence, and understanding inextricably blended."

Although he does not think it is possible or advisable to apply to the actual world, he does believe in an ethic of love, even pronouncing love more important than knowledge: "Although both love and knowledge are necessary, love is in a sense more fundamental, since it will lead intelligent

people to seek knowledge, in order to find out how to benefit those whom they love.” Now apart from the fact that this ethic is borrowed from Christianity, even though distorted, how does Russell imagine that the men that he has pronounced kings will all be brought to agree on an ethic of love, or if they could be brought to such agreement, how they will be brought to agree on what constitutes love in particular situations?

If I were king, ultimate and irrefutable, I wouldn't need Russell to tell me what my values should be, and I wouldn't necessarily choose the same values that he does. There may be others, like Hitler, Stalin, Mussolini, and Mao, to mention a few, who would disagree with Russell's ethics also. They may have an idea of love that differs from Russell's and a power to impose their idea that neither Russell nor I have. In the Christian worldview there is an answer to this kind of problem, but in Russell's world there is no escape from the everlasting battle of the arbitrary ethics of the infallible czars.

With regard to Christ, we have to ask whether, on Russell's view, He is not also an irrefutable king. The answer must be yes. And so, Russell's objections to Christ's ethic are meaningless if Russell's views of ethics mean anything. Jesus is king and Russell is king. They may disagree, but in Russell's view of the world, whether they agree or disagree is purely a matter of their monarchial whim. There can be no ethical standard by which one king may judge another, for each is a creator in his own right.

In the context of Russell's views on ethics, therefore, Russell's assertion that Christ is inferior to Socrates and the Buddha is nothing more than his personal feeling. It is not a disproof of Christianity, it is a mere statement of his personal distaste. Since on Russell's view there can be no transcendent ethic to which all men must submit, there is also no ethic by which to judge and reject Christ's teaching or character as morally defective.

### *Russell's Practical Moral Problem*

Perhaps the most interesting refutation of Russell's ethics is to be found in his own life, for he himself did not follow his own principles. It is no surprise, of course, to find that Russell cannot actually apply the principle

that all men are “ultimate and irrefutable arbiters of value” without running into the problem that not every “king” agrees. Russell’s opposition to Stalin is particularly ironic. In application apparently Russell’s principle reduces to something like an Orwellian slogan: “We are all ultimate arbiters of value, but some of us are more ultimate than others.”

What is more problematic is the way that Russell disagrees with himself on vital issues. For example, Russell, a long time pacifist, decided that the love of the good did not include loving communists. In the 1940’s and early 50’s Russell “had argued the case for preventative war [against the Soviet Union] repeatedly, in numerous articles and speeches . . .”<sup>1</sup> In September of 1953 he went so far as to write in the *New York Times Magazine*: “Terrible as a new world war would be, I still for my part would prefer it to a world communist empire.”<sup>2</sup> But just one month later in October of 1953, Russell suddenly began to deny that he had ever held such a position. Later he admitted that he had indeed suggested preventative nuclear war against the Soviet Union, but that he had offered this advice so “casually” that he soon “forgot” that he had actually said it!<sup>3</sup>

Was he a pacifist or a war-monger? Both! Nothing demonstrates better the depth of this contradiction in Russell’s thinking than a statement by one of his former students, T. S. Eliot, who defined the essence of Russell’s pacifism succinctly when he said that Russell “considered any excuse good enough for homicide.”<sup>4</sup>

This tendency to violence is not merely occasional in his writings. In his autobiography Russell, who criticizes others for being emotional rather than logical, admits to “the practice of describing things which one finds unendurable in such a repulsive manner as to cause others to share one’s fury.”<sup>5</sup> “Sharing fury” was Russell’s idea of pacifism and describing what he

1. Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), pp. 206-7.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 206. I agree with Russell’s sentiment, but the issue here is logical consistency.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 207. Later Russell became an adamant opponent of any sort of nuclear weapons.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 204. This is not uncommon among pacifists.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 211.

found “unendurable” in a “repulsive manner” was his idea of speaking the truth. Perhaps this explains the logical lapses in his writings against Christianity, too.

Pacifism, moreover, was not the only subject upon which Russell was less than logical and less than honest. First, his relationships with women were notoriously heinous. After his divorce with his first wife, which in Paul Johnson’s words, “involved a good deal of lying, deception, and hypocrisy,”<sup>6</sup> Russell had so many mistresses and wives and the various relationships are so complicated, involve so much dishonesty, cruelty, exploitation, lechery, and hypocrisy that I cannot go into it here.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that Russell theoretically held to views of women’s equality, while actually regarding women as intellectually inferior.<sup>8</sup>

Second, in spite of the gross and repeated failures in his relationships with women, Russell held that the “ills of the world could be largely solved by logic, reason, and moderation.”<sup>9</sup> As Johnson explains, Russell was not “so foolish as to suppose that human problems could be solved like mathematical equations,”<sup>10</sup> but he did have great faith in man’s ability. If men would only rationally, patiently deal with the problems of the world in a detached philosophical manner, most problems, Russell thought, could be solved in time.

This theory, too, however, was not applied to himself. As Johnson relates:

The trouble was that Russell repeatedly demonstrated, in the circumstances of his own life, that all of these propositions rested on shaky foundations. At every juncture, his views and actions were as liable to be determined by his emotions as by his reason.

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6. *Ibid.*, p. 213.

7. For an excellent summary of Russell’s relationships with women, see *Ibid.*, pp. 212, ff.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 212, 218-19.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

10. *Ibid.*

At moments of crisis logic was thrown to the winds. Nor could he be trusted to behave decently where his interests were threatened. There were other weaknesses too. When preaching his humanist idealism, Russell set truth above any other consideration. But in a corner, he was liable — indeed likely — to try to lie his way out of it. When his sense of justice was outraged and his emotions aroused, his respect for accuracy collapsed.<sup>11</sup>

His violent pacifism and his problems with women, in other words, were not quirks, they were the pattern of Russell's life. The logic which he professed to believe in was to be applied in speech-writing and essays — with certain limits that we have observed above — but logic was not resorted to when personal problems confronted him. All of this is compounded by the fact that Russell “had a profound lack of self-awareness too.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Conclusion*

To sum up, in spite of moral limitations that should have provoked some humility, not to mention repentance, Russell considered himself expert enough to pronounce sentence on Christ. Though at one point in his life he advocated a nuclear roast for the USSR, Jesus' teaching on hell was more than he could tolerate. Though Russell opposed other's opinions on moral issues with a style of writing that he himself describes as sharing his fury, he declared Jesus morally inferior for being indignant with His enemies. Though his theory of ethics makes every man a king, the right of Christ — or anyone else who disagrees with Russell — to pronounce on ethical issues is denied.

The conclusion is inescapable: Bertrand Russell's criticisms of Christ are arbitrary and self-serving. Russell's arguments have no force because he has not met the conditions necessary to speak intelligibly about ethical truth. Like other atheists, Russell had no ethical standards at all except what he himself contrived. And even these changeable, convenient, invented values

11. Ibid.

12. Ibid., p. 202.

were so constricting, he constantly broke them. How, then, shall he judge Christ, or for that matter, anyone else? In Paul's words, "Wherefore thou art without excuse, O man, whosoever thou art that judgest: for wherein thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest dost practise the same things" (Rms. 2:1).

His criticism of Christ, however, is not in vain. He has performed a real service, for what Russell has done, in effect, is to provide an apologetic for Christianity in the guise of a critique. His life and writing demonstrate with an unintended eloquence that unless God reveals ethical truth to man, there is no means whereby man can attain a true knowledge of good and evil.

## Conclusion

If Christianity is true, then it is reasonable for Russell to appeal to logic, for Christianity teaches that a rational God created the world as a rational system and that He also created man with a capacity to understand both God and the world. Christians do not believe that man's understanding can ever be exhaustive. Man can never perfectly understand himself, the world, or God. But man can have true understanding because God has created the world in such a way that the world reveals truth to man, and God has given man special revelation, especially in Holy Scripture, to teach man what he could not learn from the creation and guide man in the correct interpretation of the creation. In short, knowledge is possible if the world is what the Bible defines it to be. Russell rejects the Biblical view, but at the same time, he attempts to graft the fruits of this worldview onto his irrational view.

Again, if Christianity is true, then it is reasonable for Russell to appeal to ethical norms, for Christianity teaches that there are ethical absolutes which transcend time and place. God is a righteous God. Whatever contradicts His will is sinful and evil, in any generation, in any place in heaven or on earth. Russell rejects this view of ethics, but in its place he has nothing to offer that can serve as a standard to criticize Christ or anyone else.

In other words, Russell argues with principles that can only come from the worldview he is trying to refute. Without those principles, operating strictly on the presuppositions of his own worldview, Russell would be reduced to incoherent babble. A man who views the world either as an

ultimately deterministic system or as an ultimate chaos cannot appeal to logic. Nor can a man who believes that each man is king in the realm of ethics denounce a fellow despot.

This fundamental contradiction reveals Bertrand Russell to be the quintessential atheist. He claimed to reject Christianity on intellectual grounds, but the facts that his own philosophy cannot meet the conditions he demands of Christianity, that his metaphysics, if taken seriously, would preclude all knowledge, and that his ethical philosophy provides no standards for the judgment he pronounced against Christ suggest that his philosophical arguments were mere rationalizations for his rejection of Christianity rather than reasons.

His lifestyle, of course, is not necessarily typical. Not all atheists are immoral. Not all atheists resort to lying when they face difficult problems. Not all atheists are so blatantly irrational in their everyday life. But Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* shows that Rousseau, Marx, and Sartre, to name only a few, fit the pattern seen in Bertrand Russell — a pattern of lying, immorality, and both philosophical and personal self-contradiction.

What is important about this pattern of perversity, apart from the fact that the heroes of atheism include so few who are worthy of respect as individuals, is that it reveals clearly that atheists are not the kind of thinking machines that they often picture themselves to be. Personal factors play a far larger role in their lives and philosophies than strict philosophical logic. This is not contrary to what one normally expects, but it is contrary to what Western atheists typically believe and profess to the world about themselves.

Russell himself has fallen into the blind cave of eternal night. He is no longer an atheist. Hell and judgment, the fear of which motivated Russell to deny God and to seek to escape from the truth that he knew only too well, are no longer mere religious ideas which he can deny. But the intellectual



hypocrisy of Russell's denial of God and the absurdity of his attempted condemnation of Christ remain as a warning for us living, who still have time to turn from the folly of pretended wisdom and embrace the God who offers us everlasting life as a gift of His grace:

“Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden,  
and I will give you rest.

Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me,  
for I am gentle and lowly in heart,  
and you will find rest for your souls.

For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”