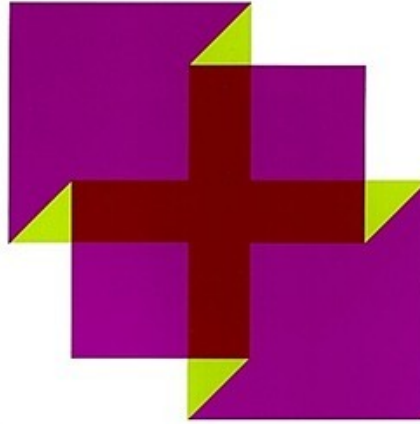


Bertrand
Russell
Why I Am Not
a Christian

and other essays on religion and related subjects



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Bertrand Russell , Paul Edwards (Editor)

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Dedicated as few men have been to the life of reason, Bertrand Russell has always been concerned with the basic questions to which religion also addresses itself -- questions about man's place in the universe and the nature of the good life, questions that involve life after death, morality, freedom, education, and sexual ethics. He brings to his treatment of these questions the same courage, scrupulous logic, and lofty wisdom for which his other work as philosopher, writer, and teacher has been famous. These qualities make the essays included in this book perhaps the most graceful and moving presentation of the freethinker's position since the days of Hume and Voltaire.

"I am as firmly convinced that religions do harm as I am that they are untrue," Russell declares in his Preface, and his reasoned opposition to any system or dogma which he feels may shackle man's mind runs through all the essays in this book, whether they were written as early as 1899 or as late as 1954.

The book has been edited, with Lord Russell's full approval and cooperation, by Professor Paul Edwards of the Philosophy Department of New York University. In an Appendix, Professor Edwards contributes a full account of the highly controversial "Bertrand Russell Case" of 1940, in which Russell was judicially declared "unfit" to teach philosophy at the College of the City of New York.

Whether the reader shares or rejects Bertrand Russell's views, he will find this book an invigorating challenge to set notions, a masterly statement of a philosophical position, and a pure joy to read.

Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects Details

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-uht! says

By the time I read this book, I was already not a Christian, but it was still hard for me to read. It was kinda like accidentally figuring out a magician's trick. You knew he wasn't *really* doing magic, but seeing how he did it somehow made the world less fun.

That said, this is a great book. It's not without bite, but it's also not bitter. Having been a big fan of Russell's epistemological books, I was impressed that this book displayed the same clarity of thought and communication. His logical proofs against God were a great review for me (I'd heard those in different forms for many years) and the section about religion and its benefit or lack thereof to humankind was something I hadn't considered to that depth. I think this is a must-read.

Manny says

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects, Bertrand Russell
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Camila N. says

Nobody makes me laugh as much while reading philosophy as this incredible sir.

Hussein saad says

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Paula says

My downstairs roommates are away for a while, and I am catsitting. It just so happens that my downstairs roommates also have an extensive collection of books. Books that have been on my to-read list for YEARS. And here they are, in one location, with no chance of someone checking them out before I can get my hands on them. So every other day, I brave the cat (actually, a hellbeast), feed and water it, and select a new tome.

One of this week's selection was "Why I Am Not a Christian." I should very much like to know whether I should be a Christian or not. For the past couple of months (years?) I have decided "not." At best, I am unaffiliated; on average, I am agnostic. I would love to know for certain either way. It would be lovely to be assured that some part of you survives death; that humanity is not an accident of the universe. Knowing the opposite is true would at least put an end to fruitless speculation.

So it was quite a surprise to me when "Why I Am Not" turned out to be only an essay, and a short one at that. Although he listed several arguments against Christianity, it just wasn't enough (for me, personally) to put the last nail in Christianity's proverbial coffin. Besides this, the book is actually a collection of essays on subjects that range from death to freedom to academia to sex. And there's a lot about sex. No, nothing scandalous (at least, not to current sensibilities). But Russell deals with sex as an essential part of the human experience, and does so in a very humane matter. Even though I didn't agree with him on every subject he wrote (and in fact, science has progressed to prove him wrong on a few counts) I was nevertheless intrigued at every page. His humanism and wit shine through.

One of the most interesting parts was Russell's constant struggle with religious authority. It's not interesting because it's a struggle-that's to be expected. But the way he describes his opponents, and the topics discuss, vary very little from debates over religion and state today. As a culture, we've progressed a bit (homosexuality is no longer a crime, for example) but we still confront the same problems: over what is sacred or profane, the limits of free speech, the power struggle in and between societies. I am sure that I will pick this book up many more times, even when it is not conveniently at hand downstairs.

Florencia says

You just have to read this. Even if you are a Christian, you should read about every point of view, to form or change (or not) your own. Russell explains complicated things with such clarity, a little of humor... It doesn't get tedious, at all.

Take "The argument of design", for instance.

I really cannot believe it. Do you think that, if you were granted omnipotence and omniscience and millions of years in which to perfect your world, you could produce nothing better than the Ku Klux Klan, the Fascisti, and Mr. Winston Churchill? Really I am not much impressed with the people who say: "Look at me: I am such a splendid product that there must have been design in the universe."

Therefore, although it is of course a gloomy view to suppose that life will die out -- at least I suppose we may say so, although sometimes when I contemplate the things that people do with their lives I think it is almost a consolation -- it is not such as to render life miserable.

Funny. You could then talk about free will and that is acceptable; we could discuss it until we reach the point of uncomfortable silence because we both know we are not going to change our minds, and then we'll have a cup of coffee, a piece of pie and never leave the safe "weather conversation" zone, again. Or, at least, for a couple of days. Because, if I am one of the products on which design in the universe is based... That is something only my mom would say.

Anyway, my point is, he is that clear. His thoughts are written with the wit and simplicity of great philosophers. The moral and emotional questions are a key ingredient in this brilliant essay that tries to explain "a religion based primarily and mainly upon fear". You can like it or not, but it is still a memorable work.

Jun 12, 14

* Also on my blog.

Alex says

I love these essays! Russell never argues that faith is impossible, but makes it clear why he doesn't have it. (I cannot believe in a god who, given an infinite universe and millions of years in which to perfect it, can come up with nothing better than the nazis and the KKK) - paraphrase

LJ says

WHY I AM NOT A CHRISTIAN...- Ex
Russell, Bertrand

Dedicated as few men have been to the life of reason, Bertrand Russell has always been concerned with the basic questions to which religion also addresses itself -- questions about man's place in the universe and the nature of the good life, questions that involve life after death, morality, freedom, education, and sexual ethics. He brings to his treatment of these questions the same courage, scrupulous logic, and lofty wisdom for which his other work as philosopher, writer, and teacher has been famous. These qualities make the essays included in this book perhaps the most graceful and moving presentation of the freethinker's position since the days of Hume and Voltaire.

"I am as firmly convinced that religions do harm as I am that they are untrue," Russell declares in his Preface, and his reasoned opposition to any system or dogma which he feels may shackle man's mind runs through all the essays in this book, whether they were written as early as 1899 or as late as 1954.

I read this in 1982 during a year-long period of self-questioning and evaluation of my faith and beliefs. This, among other books, was one which made me realize that I could have a strong faith without being

constrained by the boundaries of, and historic crimes committed in the name of, religion. "My God is the one who exists apart from all of men's agendas..." from "The Lace Reader" by Brunonia Barry, 2006.

Mobina J says

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P.J. Sullivan says

Russell first defines what he means by a Christian: someone who believes in God, the immortality of the soul, and Jesus Christ. Then he explains why he does not believe. Step by step he dismisses as fallacious the arguments for the existence of God: the first cause argument, the argument from design, etc. Then he discusses whether we survive death. Then the character of Jesus, as presented in the Gospels. He agrees that Jesus was an admirable man, but not divine and not the best or wisest of men. He gives examples from the Gospels.

He believes that all religions are false and harmful. He even calls religion “a disease born of fear” and “a source of untold misery to the human race.” Fear leads to cruelty, he says. “A habit of basing convictions upon evidence, and of giving them only that degree of certainty which the evidence warrants, would, if it became general, cure most of the ills from which the world is suffering.”

He explains his agnostic views with his usual lucidity. Russell was not an atheist; he was just not convinced by the arguments for God. He was always wary of certainties. So this book does not resolve anything, but it will give you something to think about. It is really nothing more than the application of rationality to religious beliefs. Not a difficult read.

????? says

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Mark Hebwood says

So in the end, I felt more than underwhelmed, and quite disappointed. Perhaps I am myself to blame, after all he delivered the central piece in this anthology as a speech, and a speech may not be an appropriate vehicle to carry in-depth thought. So yes - I am to blame. I shouldn't have expected a penetrating treatment of the subject. And yet, I did. And that's why my rating is rather low. Just saying this in my defence.

"I can respect the men who argue that religion is true and therefore ought to be believed, but I can only feel profound moral reprobation for those who say that religion ought to be believed because it is useful, and that to ask whether it is true is a waste of time."

What is truly admirable, is that Russell had the audacity, to publish these quotes, during the time of the early twentieth century, when people were far more traditional than they are now.

Craig says

After reading most of the "new Atheist" books -- I read the ones by Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens -- this old one by Bertrand Russell is still miles better than they. To be sure, I disagree with most of what he says, but his writing is much more clear-headed and articulate than the new ones. There really aren't many new arguments the new generation of atheists bring to the table, therefore I think it is reasonably fair to use Russell's as the standard bearer for them all.

The basic thesis is that religion -- with particular emphasis on Christianity -- has caused great harm throughout civilization, and that if we could collectively only cast aside our flimsy superstitions and vain hope for eternal life, we could propel society to new heights of happiness. His whole argument rests on the premise that man is basically good, and were it not for the (at the time) universal brainwashing of innocent children with hurtful religious ideas, we could better engineer society to be more peaceful, and less worried about taboos like sex. To Russell, the main barriers to creating more common interests between communities, societies, and nations are religious in nature, and if we could somehow erode those "false" beliefs, we could all get along better and be happier in our individual lives as well.

Here are some quotes in his book which I think illustrate his main points:

- "Religion is based...primarily and mainly upon fear...fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death. Fear is the parent of cruelty, and therefore it is no wonder....cruelty and religion go hand in hand...Science can help us to get over this craven fear." (pg 22)
- "[We should] [c]onquer the world by intelligence and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it. The whole conception of God is a conception derived from the Oriental despotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men." (pg 23)
- "The churches, as everyone knows, opposed the abolition of slavery as long as they dared, and with a few well-advertised exceptions they oppose at the present day every movement toward economic justice. The Pope has officially condemned Socialism." (pg 26)
- "Before [God] created the world He foresaw all the pain and misery that it would contain; He is therefore responsible for all of it." (pg 29)
- (in regards to his position on free will and personal responsibility) "When a man acts in ways that annoy us we wish to think him wicked, and we refuse to face the fact that his annoying behavior is a result of antecedent causes which, if you follow them long enough, will take you beyond the moment of his birth and therefore to events for which he cannot be held responsible by any stretch of the imagination." (pg 40)
- "It would seem, therefore, that the three human impulses embodied in religion are fear, conceit, and hatred. The purpose of religion...is to give an air of respectability to these passions..." (pg 44)
- "hatred and fear can, with our present psychological knowledge and our present industrial technique, be

eliminated altogether from human life." (pg 45)

- "these emotions (fear and hatred) can now be almost wholly eliminated from human nature by educational, economic, and political reforms. These educational reforms must be the basis, since men who feel hate and fear will also admire these emotions and wish to perpetuate them, although this admiration and wish will probably be unconscious, as it is in the ordinary Christian. An education designed to eliminate fear is by no means difficult to create. It is only necessary to treat a child with kindness, to put him in an environment where initiative is possible without disastrous results, and to save him from contact with adults who have irrational terrors, whether of the dark, of mice, or of social revolution." (pg 46)

It annoys me to have him treat psychology and social sciences as if they were physical sciences, with simple laws governing all of human behavior. Perhaps his view that man has no free will leads him to think man can be entirely governed by the social forces and coercion. He fails to understand that no matter how much we may train ourselves or our children to be good and responsible, man's primal instinct is always to further his own self interest. The idea that fear and hatred can be eliminated by some scientific method is ludicrous, and besides, is it always good not to fear or hate? Were he in Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia, would he not be outraged at the government and terrified for the safety of his family? Frankly, his vision for human utopia in THIS life is much more akin to childish wishful thinking than any religious teaching about utopias AFTER this life.

I know it may seem unfair to judge his writing in the present day when he didn't have as much historical data to draw upon to see the effect Communism and Facism has on society, but even in his time, there was much historical data to suggest that non-religious movements hoping to build such utopias ended up being some of the most evil campaigns in history. The reason why such atheists have been hiding for so long is the recent string of such godless movements, led by overtly secular leaders who were responsible for the deaths of literally hundreds of millions of their own citizens.

It seems clear that while Christianity does not have a perfect track record, overall it has had a much more positive than negative effect. Religious teachings provide effective restraints on our natural tendency to harm others and to act selfishly.

While it is true that the Church Authority may have condoned slavery for a long time, was it not Christian teachings that inspired the original abolitionists in America and England? Slavery was not unique to Christian nations, but was (and is) a pervasive institution in most human societies. Can the cause of slavery then be fairly cast at the feet of religious teachings, or would it be fair to suggest that humans in power tend to subject others as their subordinates or slaves? I think the answer is clear.

I am not trying to suggest some absurd conclusion that religious people are good and atheist people are bad. Humans are free to make decisions on their own, and many atheists choose to live honorable and admirable lives, while many Christians choose to act very poorly. However, on the whole, I do believe that Christianity has a net positive benefit on society, and were someone to wave a magic wand and make Christianity go away, the world would be in much worse shape than it already is.

Lisa says

"Why I Am Not A Christian?"

If I ask myself that question, the answer will be:

"I am not a Christian because I read the Bible, both Old and New Testament, from cover to cover, and consider it complete nonsense to believe that to be literal, figurative or symbolical truth."

"Why do I not believe Christianity is good?"

Because I read Bertrand Russell. As a young, impressionable person, I used to lament the fact that I was not given "the gift" of belief, as it seemed to come with confidence in the believer's "goodness". Who doesn't want to be good? Who doesn't want to feel sure about themselves? Who doesn't want to have a superior guideline to stick to?

Me, apparently.

As much as I wanted to believe in the religion that happened to be the predominant one in my environment, it all just seemed ridiculous. I remember sitting in a church as a 15-year-old, praying to a god I did not believe in to give me faith in him. It took me many years to get over the feeling of guilt over my "lack" or "misfortune". I felt left out by the non-existent god in a society that apparently unquestioningly accepted what didn't make sense to me. I said over and over again to believers who reprimanded me for my atheism:

"Oh, I respect your faith in Jesus, and I am truly sorry for not finding faith myself. I admire the morality of Christianity and wish I could be part of it!"

And I received condescending, pitying smiles in return.

Then I left my small town and moved to a university city, and started reading, reading, and reading. Philosophy, literary fiction, history, art history, religion, pedagogy. In the huge pile: Russell!

And finally, finally, I was able to break away from the Lutheran guilt trap that catches believers and nonbelievers alike in the social environment where it is dominant. Finally I could distance myself from the unthinking group pressure of "Christian morality". There is no such thing. Religion is not moral. Atheists are not likelier to kill or rape or steal than Christians, despite the fact that they do not feel the threat of eternal punishment. Moral behaviour is completely independent from supernatural belief. Russell helped me get the definitions straight.

Once I had read Russell, I could embrace my sense that the evil force (god, the killer of anything that opposes him) that appears in the Bible does not exist, and should not exist (it would be horrible!). I learned that I was not alone in seeing that religion is a human invention to simulate immortality - for those who are afraid to let go of their egos when they die - and to enforce patriarchal power structures - for those who can't convince people to follow them by choice and free will. It is a way for people to define themselves through exclusion and protectionism, not through individual merit.

Russell followed me when I moved into the field of education, and today, almost a century after he wrote his essay, I would like people to read out loud his words against groupthink and crimestop (newspeak for protective stupidity):

"The world that I should wish to see would be one freed from the virulence of group hostilities and capable of realizing that happiness for all is to be derived rather from co-operation than from strife. I should wish to see a world in which education aimed at mental freedom rather than imprisoning the minds of the young in

rigid armor of dogma calculated to protect them through life against the shafts of impartial evidence.”

Why am I not a Christian? I don't believe in the myth. Why do I not want to be a Christian? It supports evil practices and holds people hostage in an ancient worldview. It discriminates and divides and takes advantage of weaknesses to spread power. It stimulates fear in order to control. It plays Big Brother and forces people to love him.

Recommended to the world. Reposted in support of the victims of grand scale child abuse, covered up and ignored by the Catholic Church for too long to be bearable. Reposted in support of those who suffer discrimination at the hands of "evangelical" preachers of hate and division and intolerance. Reposted in support of those who feel the grip of their churches tightening in fear of the modern world of freedom of choice.

Ardeshir says

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Darya says

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Zaphirenia says

Θαυμ?ζω απερι?ριστα την καθαρ?τητα του μυαλο? και το προοδευτικ? πνε?μα του Russel στην αρχ? του 20ο? αι?να. Ευτυχ?ς δεν πρ?λαβε να δει την απ?λυτη δι?ψευση των ελπ?δων του για την επικρ?τηση του ορθολογισμο?, την αν?πτυξη του ατομικο? πνε?ματος μ?σω της στ?ρης παιδε?ας που θα βασ?ζεται στην επιστημονικ? τεκμηρ?ωση αντ? για το δ?γμα, την παγκ?σμια ειρ?νη και ευημερ?α που ονειρευ?ταν μ?σω του περιορισμο? του φ?βου ως κιν?τρου για τις ανθρ?πινες πρ?ξεις και τις πολιτικ?ς μεθοδε?σεις.

Matthew says

I probably would have liked this book a lot more if I had read it when I was younger, but now I find Russell's critique of religion profoundly disappointing. For a logician and philosopher of his caliber, his proofs--on the reasons why the basis of religious belief is existential terror, for example--are unconvincing and sometimes shockingly sloppy. They tend to rely on a straw-man caricatures that he sets up and knocks down, rather than actually engaging with the roots of faith or the complexities of metaphysics. Moreover, his critique of social mores is superficial, his proposed solutions naive at best, and his grasp of history so insultingly bad that he actually blames the outbreak of World War I on Christianity (p. 203). I expected more from such a legendary intellectual figure.

