

Russell on the utility of religion: Copleston's critique¹

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Frederick Copleston claims that "to look for a profound philosophy of religion in his [Bertrand Russell's] writing, would be to look in vain."² He suggests that the lack of profundity may be due to the fact that Russell "never tried systematically to dissociate what he regards as valuable in religion from theological belief."³ According to Copleston, if he *had* more carefully focused upon the utility of religion, he might possibly have had second thoughts about his position. I think this objection indicates more about Copleston's beliefs than about the nature of Russell's. *Contra* Copleston, I will show that Russell did systematically dissociate what he regarded as valuable in religion. In addition I will suggest that - although he became famous in his later years as the great patron of non-theistic humanism - Russell once did have a profound Platonic philosophy of religion, a philosophy eloquently expressed in "The Essence of Religion."⁴

Russell admits that a source of his original interest in philosophy was the desire to discover whether or not a sound intellectual defense could be provided for any sort of religious belief.⁵ It probably would be a mistake to make too much of this interest, if we lacked evidence that he actually engaged in what he claimed to be interested in. After all, there is a difference between having a readiness to be concerned with philosophy of religion and actually 'doing' philosophy of religion. However we do, in fact, have evidence of the latter.

The "Greek Exercises" (Russell's diary of 1888-89) clearly indicate his early interest in, and need to provide a systematic scientific justification of, theism. Thus at the early age of about 16 he writes:

I have in consequence of a variety of circumstances come to look into the very foundations of the religion in which I have been brought up. On some points my conclusions have been to confirm my former creed, while on others I have been irresistibly led to such conclusions as would not only shock my people, but have given me much pain.... I mean today to put down my grounds for belief in God. I may say to begin with that I do believe in God and that I should call myself a theist if I had to give my creed a name. Now finding reasons for belief in God I shall only take account of scientific arguments. This is a vow I have made which costs me much to keep and to reject all sentiment.... [After carefully evaluating the evidence] I think we must leave to God the primary establishment of laws which are never broken and determine everybody's doings. And not having free will we cannot have immortality.... I do wish I believed in the life eternal. For it makes me quite miserable to think man is merely a kind of machine endowed unhappily for himself with consciousness. But no other theory is consistent with the complete omnipotence of God, of which science I think gives ample manifestations. Thus I must either be an atheist or disbelieve in immortality. Finding the first impossible, I adopt the second, and let no one know. I think, however disappointing may be this view of man, it does give us a wonderful idea of God's greatness to think that he can in the beginning create laws which ... will produce creatures like ourselves, conscious not only of our existence but even able to fathom to a certain extent God's mysteries! All this with no more intervention on his part⁶

This material was not available to Copleston at the time of his writing. But I include it because I think it significantly adds to our understanding of Russell's development. First of all, the diary makes clear Russell's early commitment to reason. Even though he wants to believe, even though his increasing non-belief costs him dear, he has made a vow, in all things, to follow reason.⁷ Here we have the seeds of his later agnosticism, viz., that one should only believe what is warranted by sufficient scientific evidence and should otherwise suspend judgment. Second, although Russell purports to be defending theism, his conclusions are more

closely akin to a form of deism which maintains that man has neither immortality, nor free will, nor a soul. Thus, in spite of his willingness to call himself a theist, he had in fact already left their ranks to join the less problematic company of the deists.

I also think it important to distinguish between thinking and writing about theism. It is quite possible for a philosopher to systematically think about a position (as the evidence indicates was true of Russell) without writing about it, especially when this process occurs early in adolescence and is viewed as being both painful to self and shocking to one's people. Indeed, what we know to date concerning Russell's intellectual development suggests that most of Russell's systematic *thinking* in defense of theism (or its like) occurred during this period.⁸

The relation between "The Free Man's Worship," "The Essence of Religion," *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, and *The Problems of Philosophy* has been dealt with elsewhere by different authors, in varying degrees.⁹ The consensus is that, whatever be the merits or flaws of *The Essence of Religion*, it is the fullest expression of Russell's early religious beliefs.

The essay opens with the claim that old creeds are superstitions which have become dogma and that even when these dogmas have been rightfully rejected something of value remains. Russell insists that any tenet or doctrine put forth as authoritative without adequate grounds is not only not part of the essence of religion, but a threat to it. He writes that those who believe that

a religious outlook requires dogma, lose what is infinite in life, and become limited in their thoughts to everyday matters; they lose consciousness of the life of the whole, they lose that inexplicable sense of union which gives rise to compassion and the unhesitating service of humanity. They do not see in beauty the adumbration of a glory which a richer vision would see in every common thing, or in love a gateway to that transfigured world in which our union with the universe is fulfilled. Thus their outlook is impoverished, and their life is rendered smaller even in its finite parts. For right action they are thrown back upon bare morality; and bare morality is very inadequate as a motive for those who hunger and thirst after the infinite. Thus it has become a matter of first importance to preserve religion

without any dependence upon dogmas to which an intellectually honest assent grows daily more difficult.¹⁰

This passage is quoted at length because it is an early illustration of Russell's life-long belief that dogma is precarious, not only to religion but to any endeavor which purports to have intellectual integrity.

When we turn to examine Russell's idea of God, we find an element of obscurity. God is "seen" through the intellect, not through the senses. He does not exist in the same sense that chairs and tables exist, but rather subsists. But it is difficult to say whether we "see" God or merely the glory of God. However, when we see whatever it is that we presumably do see, we have contact with and a sense of the infinite;¹¹ we are dazzled by and have some understanding of perfection; and most important, we are attracted by, and have a better understanding of, the ideal good. And religion, or at least the essence of religion, is a hunger for, and an assimilation to, the ideal and eternal good. Thus religion, at its heart, is a kind of dynamic tension between the perfection which subsists in the form of the ideal good and the human hunger and thirst for that perfection.

Here, then, is Russell's answer to the question about the value of religion. Religion has utility because it satisfies the religious feeling and can, if unfettered by dogma and other kinds of small-mindedness, bring us in closer contact with perfection.

Another way of making the same point is to compare Russell's "The Essence of Religion" with John Stuart Mill's "Utility of Religion".¹² Of course, there are differences between the two essays. Mill writes as an empiricist. Russell as a Platonist. Although Mill puts forward the grounds for believing in an after-life and Russell does not, and Mill outlines a "religion of humanity" where Russell does not, still both agree that religion can be stripped of its supernaturalism and of its dogmatism, yet have its essence preserved. And both insist that, given the essence of religion, it has great utility.

"The essence of religion," writes Mill, "is the strong and earnest direction of the emotions and desires towards an ideal object, recognized as the highest excellence, and as rightfully paramount over all selfish objects of desire."¹³ Similarly the essence of re-

ligion, writes Russell, lies in the subordination of the finite part of our life to the infinite part,¹⁴ a subordination that necessarily involves the contemplation and worship of the ideal good.

Only the ideal good can satisfy fully our hunger for perfection. Only the ideal good demands no surrender to power, no sacrifice of aspiration to possibility, and no slavery of thought to fact.¹⁵ ... The ideal good forms an essential part of the religious life, since it supplies the motive to action by giving content to the desire for universal good.... Without the knowledge and worship of the ideal good, the love of man is blind, not knowing in what direction to seek the welfare of those whom it loves....¹⁶ In other words, in a religion which is not theistic, love of God is replaced by worship of the ideal good.¹⁷

Thus both Mill and Russell agree that religion is useful because it is essentially the product of craving to know a much better world than our own, and because when it is brought into the sphere of belief it can be dominant in action, and, when it is, it pursues a selfless and universal good.

If this brief analysis is correct, then Russell did dissociate what he regarded as valuable in religion from theological belief. It is difficult to say exactly when Russell began to think systematically about the distinction between the truth and the utility of religion. Knowing Russell's great debt to Mill, it seems safe to say that this intellectual exercise began no later than his first reading of Mill's "Utility of Religion" which seems to have occurred in 1891.¹⁸ We can say with greater assurance that Russell's first attempt in print to describe systematically what was valuable in religion occurs in "The Essence of Religion."

I do not pretend to have made a case for Russell having a profound philosophy of religion. But clearly he did have a philosophy of religion which examined the question of the utility of religion and which, during the early years of its development, concluded that religion had great utility, at least at its heart. I also venture to suggest that it is a profound Platonic philosophy of religion. Does not Job suggest that respect for truth at least takes equal priority with other forms of righteousness; that the truly righteous never utters deceit and, presumably, never believes what is deceit-

ful (*Job* 27:3–5)? And is Russell's insistence that the cognitive aspect of religion must be swept clear of emotions, interests, and all non-truths any less profound?

After all, if anything does distinctively mark Russell's conversion from a "no truth, great utility" to a "no truth, great disutility" position concerning religion, it is his shift from Platonism to empiricism. Having distinguished between *the essence of ideal religion* and *the essence of historical theism*, Russell began to realize that, whether one conceives of the ideal as the perfect or only as the much better, historical theism fits into neither category. He began to realize that religion, as it actually exists in the world, is something of a horror. For "the three human impulses embodied in religion are fear, conceit, and hatred."¹⁹ Given this new empirical construct we must conclude that the nature of historical theism is as follows:

Religion is a set of beliefs held as dogmas, dominating the conduct of life, going beyond or contrary to evidence, and inculcated by methods which are emotional or authoritarian, not intellectual.²⁰ Religion is based ... primarily and mainly upon fear. 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 go hand in hand.... The more intense has been the religion of any period and the more profound has been the dogmatic belief, the greater has been the cruelty and the worse has been the state of affairs.²¹

Ironical as it seems, it is precisely because Russell carefully examined the beliefs and practices of historical theism that he concludes religion has, on balance, great disutility.

Of course, Copleston disagrees. But in spite of his great fairness concerning other matters and other works,²² here he seems most reluctant to argue the case. He thinks it almost self-evident that Christianity has, on balance, great utility. In fact, he thinks this so luminously clear that it is pointless to even consider Russell's case against Christianity. Thus he writes

Russell's polemics against Christianity do not concern us here.

It is sufficient to point out that though on occasion he pays tributes to, for example, the ideal of love and to the Christian ideal of value of the individual, attack is more prominent than commendation. And while Russell undoubtedly draws attention to some familiar black patches in Christian history, he tends to exaggerate and, sometimes, to sacrifice accuracy to wit and sarcasm.²³

Surely this will not do. Surely Russell's polemic against Christianity cannot be dismissed in such a cavalier manner. If, as Russell suggests, fear is the basis of religion, and if "fear begets cruelty" and "is probably one of the chief causes of meanness and unkindness in the world,"²⁴ then religion begets cruelty and is probably one of the chief causes of meanness and unkindness.

Let us follow Copleston's probable defense. I begin with a conjecture as to what he, in contrast to Russell, would hold to be the essence of religion. The great majority of theists agree that what is at the heart of Christianity is the religious experience. A religious experience is "a loving, but unclear, awareness of some object which irresistibly seems to the experiencer as something transcending the self, something which cannot be pictured or conceptualized, but of the reality of which doubt is impossible — at least during the experience." When you get what one might call the pure type of religious experience, as did St. Francis of Assisi, you get an experience that results in an overflow of dynamic and creative love.²⁵

The essence of religion is love, not fear. The essence of religion is the experience of a supreme personal, absolutely loving, being. And the reason why this is so valuable is because it exalts us, gives our lives objective purpose, and generates the highest forms of unselfish love. Thus the fear Russell alludes to is not an essential part of religion. To be fearful and to allow this fear to generate meanness and cruelty — is a turning away from God, and is just the opposite of what the essential religious experience compels us to do.

Both sides of this dispute tend to talk as essentialists. Religion has an essence and once we determine what it is, we can then pro-

ceed to measure its value or utility. Russell in the period surrounding the writing of "The Essence of Religion" held that this essence consists in a craving for and assimilation to the ideal good and, therefore, concluded that religion had great utility. Later his position changed. He still held that the essential nature of religion is rooted in an emotion, but it is a different emotion. Since the sentiment that attracts most ordinary men and women to religion is fear, and since fear is probably the most dangerous of emotions, religion is, on balance, a most dangerous phenomenon. Copleston, on the other hand, believes (or at the time wrote as if he believed) that religion in its essential pure form necessarily generates love. Accordingly, religion in this pure and unblemished form generates enormous utility.

First of all, suffice it here to say that religion, at its best, does what Copleston says it does and what Russell once believed it did. Religion, at its best, provides the rich soil for love, and for devotion to truth and the good. At its worse, religion does the opposite. It nurtures fear, gullibility, and acquiescence in, or the perpetration of, such evils as poverty, miseducation, and war. Second, I see little value (and even less justice) in talking about each and every religion as if it had the same eternally fixed essence. If Russell rejects a Platonism which petrifies a pure and unblemished essence of religion, justice seems to require that he also reject the petrification of its most blemished forms. For fairness demands that we judge religions as we judge individuals, individually, without assuming they must carry the sins of their parents, and without assuming they cannot change or improve their ways. Finally, there is the difficult question of the extent to which we can measure the utility of a single religious belief — to say nothing about measuring the utility of Catholicism, Christianity, or theism in general. We can take sides. Admittedly, we can assign weights, develop some sort of calculus, and thereby determine whether or not theism, on balance, has utility. But to say we know, in any strict sense of knowing, what the utility of theism is, is at best misleading. The truth of the matter is that each side to this dispute pretends to have sufficient knowledge about the utility of religion and each, in fact, does not. Perhaps the sadder truth is that the theist and non-theist give different weight to different factors and that because of this and

because there is neither a non-normative way of adjudicating these preferences nor a truly objective way of measuring them, the question of the utility of religion cannot cognitively be satisfactorily answered.

Notes

1. I am indebted to Frederick Copleston and Kenneth Blackwell for reading early drafts of this manuscript and their helpful suggestions.
2. Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, Vol. VIII (London: Burns and Oates, 1966), p. 481.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 482.
4. Bertrand Russell, "The Essence of Religion," *The Hibbert Journal* 11 (1912):46–63. Reprinted in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Denno (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), pp. 565–576 and in *Contemplation and Action 1902–14, The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* 12, ed. Richard A. Rempel, Andrew Brink and Margaret Moran (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), pp. 110–122.
5. Bertrand Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 11.
6. Bertrand Russell, *Cambridge Essays 1888–89, The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* 1, ed. Kenneth Blackwell, Andrew Brink, Nicholas Griffin, Richard A. Rempel, John G. Slater (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 5&7.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
8. According to Russell, his systematic investigation of the supposed rational arguments in favor of fundamental Christian beliefs began at about the age of fifteen and, more or less, ended at eighteen. Thus he writes: "At this age [fifteen] I began a systematic investigation of the supposed rational arguments in favour of fundamental Christian beliefs. I spend endless hours in meditation upon this subject; I could not speak to anybody about it for fear of giving pain. I suffered acutely both from the gradual loss of faith and the need of silence. I thought that if I ceased to believe in God, freedom and immortality, I should be very unhappy. I found, however, that the reasons given in favour of these dogmas were very unconvincing. I considered them one at a time with great seriousness. The first to go was freewill. At the age of fifteen, I became convinced that the motions of matter, whether living or dead, proceeded entirely in accordance with the laws of dynamics, and therefore the will can have no influence upon the body.... About two years later, I became convinced that there is no life after death, but I still believed in God, because the 'First Cause' argument appeared to be irrefutable. At the age of eighteen, however, shortly before I went to

Cambridge, I read Mill's *Autobiography*, where I found a sentence to the effect that his father taught him that the question 'Who made me?' cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question 'Who made God?' This led me to abandon the 'First Cause' argument and to become an atheist. Throughout the long period of religious doubt, I had been rendered very unhappy by the gradual loss of belief, but when the process was completed, I found to my surprise that I was quite glad to be done with the subject.... For I took the view then, which I have taken ever since, that a theological proposition should not be accepted unless there is the same kind of evidence for it that would be required for a proposition in science." (*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. I:1872-1914 [London: Allen & Unwin, 1967], pp. 47-48.)

9. For some of the most helpful studies, see: A.S. Pringle-Pattison "The Free Man's Worship: A Consideration of Mr. Bertrand Russell's Views on Religion," *The Hibbert Journal* 7, 12 (1913-14):47-63; R.F. Alfred, "The Religious Aspect of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy," *The Harvard Theological Review* 9 (1916):157-189; G.H. Hardy "Mr. Russell as a Religious Teacher," *The Cambridge Magazine* 6 (1917):624-626, 650-653; Edgar Sheffield Brightman "Russell's Philosophy of Religion," *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, ed. Paul Arthur Schlipp (Evanston, IL: Library of Living Philosophers, 1946), pp. 539-556; Ronald Jaeger, *The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), pp. 484-507; and Jack Pitt "Russell on Religion," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6 (1975):40-50. For a more comprehensive bibliography, see: Kenneth Blackwell, "A Secondary Bibliography of Russell's 'The Essence of Religion,'" *Russell* 1:2 (1981-82):143-146.
10. "The Essence of Religion," *op.cit.*, pp. 50-51.
11. For an excellent discussion of "The Essence of Religion" and Russell's sense of the infinite (or what Blackwell prefers to call "impersonal self-enlargement"), see: Kenneth Blackwell, *The Spinozistic Ethics of Bertrand Russell* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), especially pp. 143-148.
12. John Stuart Mill, "Utility of Religion," *Three Essays on Religion* (New York: Henry Holt, 1874), pp. 69-122.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
14. "The Essence of Religion," *op.cit.*, p. 60.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 52.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
18. *Cambridge Essays*, *op.cit.*, p. 347.
19. Bertrand Russell, *Why I am not a Christian* ed. Paul Edwards (London: Allen & Unwin, 1957), p. 34.
20. Bertrand Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (London: Allen & Unwin, [1920] 1949), p. 74.
21. *Why I am not a Christian*, *op.cit.*, pp. 29, 27.
22. For example, Copleston's review of Russell's *History of Western Philosophy* [*The Wind and the Rain* 4, 11 (1947):57-63] is a paradigm of fair-minded scholarship, if not actual saintliness.

23. *A History of Philosophy*, op.cit., pp. 482. The emphasis is my own.
24. Bertrand Russell, "On the Evils Due to Fear," in Russell et al., *If I Could Preach Just Once* (New York: Harper, 1929), p. 221.
25. Frederick Copleston, "The Existence of God – A Debate (with Russell)," *Why I am Not a Christian*, op.cit., pp. 156–157.