

# A Critical Response to Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*

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Bertrand Russell's essay *Why I Am Not a Christian* is a popular touch-point for the community of Atheist writers and thinkers. It is a source of quotations as well as offering a comforting substantiation of their shared beliefs. Some portray the writing as definitive in nature while others comment happily on the enjoyment they find in rereading it from time to time. Lord Russell's life and philosophy are extolled for the commitment to reason that they exhibit and there is little doubt that one is expected to read this volume [of the same name] of essays in this light; that this is as well-reasoned commentary on the deceitful and harmful nature of religious belief and activity that is almost beyond the reach of contrary argument.

Having not read Russell in any form since my undergraduate days, I endeavored to read *Why I Am Not* from a neutral perspective. As a Christian and a theologically lettered man, this was not an easy view to take since it was obviously quite contrary to my worldview. As I read I took copious notes so that the structure of the philosopher's arguments could take shape and I would be able to determine if, from the evidence that he would present in favor of his positions, his conclusions were true or subject to challenge. If one were to summarize the main conclusion that Russell is arguing in favor of, it is this: people believe in religion and God strictly out of emotion rather than reason. As a further subtext, the pre-eminent emotion that Lord Russell makes accountable for this belief is fear. Perhaps as closing statement meant to encourage the reader to similarly proclaim themselves to be free thinkers prepared to stare down the reality of the world around us, Russell issues this challenge in the final paragraph,

"We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world — its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness; see the world as it is and be not afraid of it. Conquer 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 ancient Oriental despotisms. It is a conception quite unworthy of free men.” (pg 23)

## I. What is a Christian?

Russell begins his essay by stressing the importance of defining terms and by declaring what he means by a Christian. There are two standards which must be met in order for him to refer to a person as a follower of Christ. One, that person must have a belief in God and in immortality and on this point, he is quite adamant. I concur, Christianity without God and the notion of eternal life is something else altogether beyond even ecumenical charity and must be given some other label. Second, Russell states that a person must have *some* kind of belief about Jesus Christ (emphasis mine.) It is here that the careful reader begins to see that the unassailable arguments that they have been led to expect may be more couched and nuanced than originally thought. If one must have some thought about Christ, what is the spectrum of permissible thought? Can one accept *some* essential doctrinal point but not others? What is couched in this adjective?

Russell answers these questions with this requirement, “you must have at the very lowest the belief that Christ was, if not divine, at least the best and wisest of men.” (pg. 4) Immediately, the reader should pull up short and demand correction of this proposal for the minimum standard of membership. The divinity of Christ in all sects and doctrinal statements is non-negotiable. One cannot simply accept Jesus as just ‘the best and brightest’ minus his essential nature as God. As C.S. Lewis cleverly argued, this is not an option that has been left to you. We must conclude then that the logician has spoken his categorization to life and that he is not going to successfully argue against Christianity but rather, against his personal notion of Christianity. In other words, Russell is not basing his denial of Christianity on the God and Jesus Christ of the Christian church but rather, a Christ of his own making. He clarifies this with the following sentences,

“Therefore I take it that when I tell you why I am not a Christian I have tell you two different things: first, why I do not believe in God and in immortality; and, secondly, why I do not think that Christ was the best and wisest of men, although I grant him a very high degree of moral goodness.” (pp 4-5)

I am left to wonder at this very early stage of the essay whether or not it is fruitful to continue. Russell is not basing the fundamental arguments that support his conclusion

on fact but rather, on his incorrect assertions (assumptions?) about what makes one a Christian. If I consider this false 'christian' that he portrays a straw man, all that follows will simply knock down that creation rather than present a valid, reasoned argument with evidence that can be evaluated independently of the essay. I suppose that I must now be prepared to read further prepared to confront additional falsehoods and unwarranted liberties with the essentials of Christian belief.

### **The Existence of God**

Having created a false Christ on which to build his arguments, Russell addresses the validity of belief in his first requirement: that one must believe in the existence of God. Though he alludes to a large number of possible arguments for God's existence, he narrows his discussion to five. He attributes these to the Catholic Church and her desire to utilize them as support for the proposition that the existence of God can be proven by reason alone. He begins by addressing the Argument from First Cause. Midway through the single paragraph he devotes to it however, he simply dismisses the concept as unworthy of consideration saying "you can see that the argument that there must be a First Cause is one that cannot have any validity." (pg. 6) Russell alludes to John Stuart Mills and a statement Mills made as formative of his thinking when he read 'My father taught me that the question 'Who made me?' cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question 'Who made God?'. Russell further states,

"There is no reason why the world could not have come into being without first cause; nor, on the other hand, is there any reason why it should not have always existed." (pg. 7)

I imagine, given the date of this essay in 1927, that we should not be too harsh in our assessment of Russell's ability to confirm this statement since the science that points to the creation of the world at a specific point in time was just becoming available to him (Einstein 1916, Hubble 1927). What it should cause us to evaluate however, is his confidence in his conclusions given the possibility that additional information may come to light at some future point which affect the plausibility of his arguments? Pascal might have something to say to this.

With the preponderance of evidence pointing to a universe with a distinct beginning any proper consideration must come to a position on the first cause of this beginning. The universe cannot have been self caused as that would require something to pre-exist

outside of itself prior to its creative act. To simply state that “there is no reason why the world could not have come into being without first cause” without defending this assertion is an inadequate argument against the notion of the Prime Mover. As I consider the careless foundation upon which Russell begins to build the remainder of his arguments I’m hesitant to place any confidence in a construction this rickety.

The Atheist will point to this argument as an example of ad-hoc reasoning as the question of who created God creates an apparent dilemma for the first cause discussion. The nuance of the Law of Causality that is often overlooked by the atheistic contingent in proposing this ‘chicken and egg’ question is that the principle states that everything that comes to be needs a cause. God does not come to be nor was He created. He is and always was - an eternal being. Is this a ‘just so’ story that cannot be supported? In examining the requirements that scientists would demand of a Prime Mover, we find this brief schedule:

- The First Cause must be self-existent, eternal, and immaterial (because He/It creates time, space, and material and the First Cause must be outside of time, space, and matter.)
- The First Cause must be powerful beyond comprehension to be able to create ex nihilo.
- The First Cause must possess extraordinary intelligence in order to design a universe with such precision and complexity.
- The First Cause must be personal in order to make the choice (impersonal forces such as the wind do not make choices) to create the universe out of nothing.

Such a First Cause precisely matches the characteristics that Christians attribute to God. Shall we follow Russell’s lead and simply dismiss this as coincidence?

The next two arguments that Russell wants to dispense with are the Natural Law argument and the Argument from Design. In addressing both of these, the philosopher takes a similar approach along the lines of this, things are the way they are because that’s the way they are. Well then, it’s settled isn’t it? I don’t think that Russell is intentionally so casually dismissive of these positions but that’s the tone that his words convey. I will credit the brevity of his approach to the fact that this essay is sourced from a lecture that Russell delivered to an audience (The National Secular Society) that

was favorably predisposed to his positions and his assumption may have been that they were already familiar with arguments and quite possibly in agreement with them.

While I am willing to overlook the paucity of evidence in support of his positions, I am unwilling to so easily dismiss the false dilemma that he creates in order to put aside God's omnipotence and omniscience and their role in the Argument from Design. Russell issues the belittling challenge to believers in Design by saying "it is a most astonishing thing that people can believe that this world, with all things that are in it, with all its defects, should be the best that omnipotence and omniscience have been able to produce in millions of years." (pg 10) In an attempt to drive the stake further into the heart of the Design argument, Russell asks that we assume the role of Creator and asks if you, given the same twin powers, would create a world that contains nothing better than the Ku Klux Klan or the Fascists. The answer that a person would give will depend on whom you ask. The free-will racist will certainly answer yes to the creation of the Klan while I would personally answer no. Why does he resort to such an outlandish argument when his own reason should have been sufficient to put the proposition of a Designer to rest? Russell's failure to address the theological at all (a very common tactic as we shall see) is troubling. He fails to offer and dispute the idea that the original creation was in a state of perfection and then filled with creatures in possession of free will. That the created choose for ill instead of good is the risk that an omnipotent and omniscient God was willing to take in order for love to be present rather than simply basking in the worship of a planet full of automatons.

I shall not address the section on the Moral Arguments for Deity since Russell himself obviously thought them unworthy, describing the whole mess as "one stage further in what I shall call the intellectual descent that the Theists have made in their argumentations." (pg. 11) To follow this, the speaker then amuses himself with the final of the five arguments that he attempts to prove false and that is the belief of the Theists (why has he dropped the Christian label?) that "the existence of God is required in order to bring justice into the world." It may be the way in which he forms the sentence but the very presence of injustice seems to run contrary to what he states as a Christian belief. To Russell, heaven and hell are strictly functional. One is to serve as reward and the other as punishment so that there can be eschatological justice. Without God and his final destinations, there can be no justice. On the face of the argument and our own experience we can see that this is incorrect. Justice and injustice certainly cohabitate this

plane of existence; wrongs are righted and penalties meted out while at the same time, injustices are seen to continue to exist. Again, the free will nature of God's creatures is not in sight, only the failure of the heavenly Jailer to instantly address wrongs is.

Russell concludes this set of arguments with two additional reasons that he concludes people believe in God. First, they are taught from infancy to do so and second, people who believe in God have an innate desire for a 'big brother' God who will lurk about and watch over them. If I have followed the construction of the essay thus far, Russell has attempted to knock down a handful of the standard arguments for the existence of God and, rather than show how his dismissal of these arguments supports his overall conclusions, he then offers two non sequiturs instead. How this makes his case I am at a loss to explain. To critique the essay to this point is difficult as the philosopher has given nothing in the way evidence for his belief in the correctness of his positions. Shall I propose counter arguments and provide evidence in the face of his dismissive tenor?

At the midpoint of his essay, Russell seems to have done little but affirm the assertion that he makes about people subscribing to their religious worldviews out of emotion. This certainly seems to be the case with his faith in the Atheistic worldview. The few arguments that he addressed have simply been dismissed in the most cursory fashion because he *feels* that they are undeserving of support. Would the Christian be allowed similar liberty? To say that one believes in God and, when asked to give a reason, to simply say that any position to the contrary is silly and beneath address would be to open oneself up to ridicule and scorn. I am led to consider what fear drives the Atheist to such argumentative tactics. Is it that something inside of them continually rehearses thoughts of doubts contrary to their 'settled' positions?

### **Is Christ the Best and the Brightest?**

After this insubstantial beginning, Russell turns his attention to Christ and his second standard of Christianity, Jesus' divinity and His status as a wise man. We must make note that the author does not address the divinity of Jesus directly. His aim is to undermine any possible consideration of this issue by focusing the discussion on the quality of Christ's character. If Russell can successfully argue that the character of Jesus is not up to the perfect goodness of God, the divinity question need not even be brought into the dialog. Logically this conclusion makes sense. The trouble we encounter in this essay is that Russell approaches the discussion in a fallacious and

deceptive manner which causes us to question any trust we might develop in his positions.

Russell presents a quartet of bible verses in which he makes an interesting argument against Christians and therefore, Christianity. It goes like this; if Christians do not live up to each jot and title of Christ's words then there must be some defect in the character of the Christ himself. (As an aside, Russell gleefully finds himself agreeing with Christ more than Christians do. To what end he makes this statement we can only guess. If forced to come to a conclusion, I would surmise that it is for differentiation purposes.) Let us examine each of the verses in turn to determine how they reflect on the Lord's character. It is important to note that hermeneutical principles appear to be foreign to Russell as he plucks individual verses out of their context and then expects fealty to the literal reading of the sentence(s). Any Christian that did this would be admonished by the larger community of believers but it appears that there may be a different standard for Atheist use of the scriptures.

**“But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also.” (Matthew 5:39; Luke 6:29)** Russell asserts that not many Christians accept this verse as demonstrated by their behavior. His example of asking whether or not the Prime Minister would allow himself to be beaten in respect of Christ's maxim demonstrates an inferior (or purposely deceptive) interpretation of the verse in its context. I defer to D.A. Carson for an explanation of the fallacy of this approach,

“...we must agree that absolutizing any text, without due respect for the context and flow of the argument, as well as for other things Jesus says elsewhere, is bound to lead to distortion and misrepresentation of what Jesus means.” (*Jesus' Sermon on the Mount*, pg 54)

Jesus is speaking in the larger passage of 5:38-42 of personal self-sacrifice. The Greek text describes a strike on the cheek commonly associate with an insult rather than grave bodily danger, something not conveyed in its English translation. Jesus is stating here that the Christian is to not retaliate for insults. He is not proposing that the Christian subject themselves to injury without ever putting up an effort at self preservation. To conclude otherwise is a disingenuous utilization of Christ's words. Russell also pulls another verse from this passage as evidence of Christian hypocrisy; **“Give to the one**



**who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you.”** (Matthew 5:42) Jesus directs our charity to poor but this would be unreasonably generalized to include all people who demand something of us. Cross referencing this verse against the whole of scripture finds no further support for Russell’s use of the verse.

In the second example, **“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.”** (Matthew 7:1; Luke 6:37), Russell again resorts to his literalist tendency. By his logic, a Christian who is a Judge by profession is guilty of hypocrisy. Again, we must turn back to the scriptures and the context to determine if Jesus indeed voices a prohibition against Christians sitting on the bench. Jesus is addressing the practice of being critical of others (not jurisprudence) while you yourself are guilty of the same or worse. Had Russell bothered to consider the next verse regarding the speck in the eye of another contrasting with the plank in your own he might have been clearer in his interpretation. I wonder if he would have also been favorably disposed to ramming a stick into his eye before looking to the faults of another.

Finally, Russell restrains his criticism only to note that there is little obedience to Christ’s maxim **“You still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.”** (Luke 18:22) This verse comes from a longer conversation that Jesus is having at the behest of a man who has come to be known as the Rich Young Ruler. Proper reading would first lead us to the conclusion that Jesus is not making a general application of principle, contra Russell’s use of the verse. More importantly, Jesus is not commending an asceticism as the philosopher would like to propose (in order to criticize the Christ). Jesus perceives that in the case of the Ruler, his wealth would be an impediment to deeper relationship with God. In our modern world, Jesus might point that our playing of video games, possession of collector cars, or a devotion to reading might threaten to overwhelm the primacy of our relationship with God. He would recommend to us that we dispense with these activities or possessions as well.

Has Russell succeeded in commenting on the character of Christ? His interpretation of the evidence of Christian lives not being aligned to his interpretation of a selection of biblical verses certainly fails to comment on the wisdom or character of Christ. He has engaged in the worst sort of biblical abridgement, conveniently ignoring both general



context and the immediate verses which serve to clarify the appropriate meaning of the verse in question. It is difficult to state Russell's reason for doing so and to declare to know his heart would be unfair. I will say that, in no way has Russell impugned the character of Christ through the evidence he has utilized.

Having stated how much he likes the maxims previously discussed, Russell then proposes to give evidence of the deficient teaching of Jesus. He prefaces the list with a quick, derisive statement of doubt as to whether or not Jesus ever existed but given the evidence in support of His existence, I will not address that proposition here. The core charge against the wisdom of Jesus centers for Russell around the statements that Jesus made regarding the imminence of His return and the reality that it did not occur. Christians are mindful that Jesus said that no one knows the hour of future events (Matthew 24:32), including Jesus himself. Russell then demands an accuracy of Jesus which He did not demand of himself. He offers a selection of verses in which Jesus says that various events will not transpire prior to his return (Matthew 10:23; Matthew 6:34; Luke 9:27). Again, context provides us with the clear meaning of Jesus' words and we discover, unsurprisingly that Russell again demands a literalist interpretation that favors his disdain of Christ's wisdom. For example, in Matthew 10:23, Jesus says "When you are persecuted in one place, flee to another. I tell you the truth, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel before the Son of Man comes." Does Jesus propose a specific deadline for His return? Certainly not in this verse as it refers to the incomplete nature of the Jewish mission, understandable in Matthew who tends to focus on the obstinacy of Israel. Perhaps Russell would have been better off to reserve his judgment of Christ's wisdom (based on his flawed reading) in light of his earlier appreciation for Jesus' maxims in the Sermon on the Mount.

In his final attempt to diminish the person and character of Christ, Russell turns to presenting his argument in support of a defect in the moral character of Jesus. He roots this evaluation solely in Christ's belief in Hell. Why this was not an issue with God (the Father) earlier in the essay is not mentioned. Russell makes this interesting statement,

"I do not myself feel that any person who is really profoundly humane can believe in everlasting punishment." (pg. 17)

This belief, combined with a supposedly "vindictive fury against these people who would not listen to His preaching" combine for Russell to bring Christ's morality into

question. As evidence of this assertion, Russell points to Jesus saying “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?” (Matthew 23:33) This verse is yet another example of a single verse being pulled from its larger context because it has the right combination of words to make the philosopher’s point. In the whole of chapter 23, Jesus is condemning the leaders of Israel because their intransigence has led their people astray. This is not an example of Jesus being personally insulted. The leaders of Israel had been given the Law and the Prophets and in the mind of Jesus, they had no excuse for their continued disobedience other than their own stubborn hearts. Condemnation is a consequence of decision, not a capricious punishment by Jesus.

The author rehearses a further litany of disconnected instances which support Jesus’ lack of morality: putting the demons into the swine, cursing the fig tree, encouraging the amputation of the hand that steals and leads you into sin. Properly handled, none of these verses even comes within a hair of evidencing the immorality of Christ. Russell would like the reader to accept these vignettes at face value but what he ends up doing is putting his own lack of ethics on display. To have the ability to read and research the theology and biblical context of the verses that he abuses for his own ends and to not do it appears to make one purposely ignorant. To further use this mishandling of scripture to mislead others into believing a false worldview is an example of the type of leadership that led Jesus to issue such vehement epithets. Russell failed to see the irony.

## Conclusion

Bertrand Russell is described as a fine logician and philosopher. His essay, which became the title of a collection of related pieces, *Why I Am Not a Christian* makes his case based on two premises:

- P1 The Existence of God is Dispute
- P2 Christ is not the wisest and best man
- C Christianity is false and therefore I am not a Christian

Unfortunately, this essay provides supporting evidence for neither of these premises, and because of this the conclusion proposed cannot be evaluated as true. Given the minimal research that would be necessary to properly place the bible verses in their proper context and to address the supporting arguments against God’s existence, one

must wonder why a more honest treatment was not given. I understand why the Atheists are so enamored with the essay. It is quotable and the gravitas of the senior philosopher lends it an air of unassailability. On the other hand, the unethical approach that omits rather than substantiates leads me to question the intention of the author. I suppose I will be able to make a better judgment after digging further into the other essays contained in this volume. More damaging than my lack of confidence is that he has established a baseline which the current Atheist writers have elected to follow in the breezy style with which they toss arguments of eternal importance around.

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