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Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19352632>**Bertrand Russell's Philosophy of Religion: An Intellectual Vision of Life: A Critical Analysis****Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Shah**

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E-mail: mechatechnics@live.com**Abstract**

Bertrand Russell is known as an 'atheist' though he proclaimed himself as an 'agnostic'. In any case he has deep concern to religions and he is known as an intellectual critic of religion. His thoughts represents one of the most influential and rational critiques on the traditional religious beliefs. His criticism and rejection of religion is based in a comprehensive intellectual vision of life, supported by logic, devoted to ethical humanism, and aimed at deep concern for human values and freedom. His writings present the view of religion as a psychological, social, and philosophical phenomenon rather than a divine revelation. His philosophy of religion should be understood as an intellectual and critical vision of life due to the fact that it attempts to provide a comprehensive worldview which includes explanations about the nature of reality, definitions and importance of faith and dogmas, the place of humanity in the universe, and the basis of morality without relying on any metaphysical or supernatural beliefs. His intellectual vision has been praised for its rational honesty yet it has been criticized for its metaphysical limitations and rational approach toward revealed contexts and existential pessimism. This research critically analyzes Russell's philosophy of religion as an intellectual vision of life, rational approach towards religion and logical examination of its foundations, evolution, characteristic versatility, enormous influences in determining the course of human history, its positive effects and harms to humanity along with the view to determine Russell's place as a philosopher of religion and his outlook in the philosophy of religion.

Keywords: *Agnosticism, Dogma, Faith, Herd Instinct, Myth, Morality.*

Introduction

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) was a prolific writer. He occupied a great place in philosophy and enjoyed himself a worldwide fame. His main interests were mathematics, logic, epistemology, ethics, esthetics, politics, education and religion. Here the objective is to discuss his thoughts which are related to religion only.

Religion is not an abstract theory rather it is an umbrella term for certain beliefs, dogmas and practices. As Russell him-self highlighted at different places that Christian religion comprises

the following elements *viz.* The existence of God, Immortality, The Christ (if not divine yet at least as the best and the wisest person), The Concept of Hell or Everlasting Fire (though it is not essential), Second Coming of the Christ, etc. His philosophy of religion comprises all such elements.

According to Brightman, Russell has given 'less rigorous attention to the philosophy of religion'.¹ But he accepts that whatever has been written by Bertrand Russell on the topic of religion is more than the complete works of many thinkers on this subject. His views caused hot debates and harsh discussions in the religious as well as in the none-religious circles.

Early Development of Freethinking

Born 1870 at Trelleck, Wales, in a respected family the child was named Bertrand Arthur William Russell. His grandfather, Lord John Russell was the person who introduced the Reform Bill of 1832 and served twice as prime minister under Queen Victoria. Russell's parents, Lord and Lady Amberley, were famous due to their advanced opinion regarding morals, theology and politics.

When Russell was only two years his mother died. Then he and his brother both were kept under the two tutors. Later when the father died it was known that both the tutors were atheists² whom Russell's father had appointed with the view to save his children from the "evils of religious upbringing"³ After the death of father, the grandparents became the guardians of the orphan brothers and they were determined to rescue them from the "clutches of intriguing infidels".⁴

He, at the age of fifteen years, started systematic search and tried to investigate the alleged rational arguments which were presented in support of Christianity. He spent hours in thinking and in silence. He admitted that he "suffered acutely from the gradual loss of faith" and he also thought that if he "ceased to believe in God, freedom and immortality" he would be very unhappy. But in his analysis of the arguments which were presented in favour of the above doctrines, whom he had taken with seriousness he found all of them unconvincing.⁵ And in his endeavor of intellectual ambition he rejected the doctrine of freewill also and wrote that "the first to go was free will."⁶ At seventeen he rejected the idea of "life after death" but still he had faith in God due to the irrefutability (he thought at that time) of the First Cause argument. Till the age when he was eighteen he continued to believe in a Deist's⁷ God⁸.

During Cambridge stay while Russell was reading Mill's Autobiography he read that Mill's father thought him that the question "Who made him?" could not be answered because it consequently arose the question "who made God?"⁹ This revealed to him the nature of the First Cause Argument and he abandoned this argument and he became¹⁰ atheist¹¹. So in this gradual mental struggle he successively, got rid of the free will, the immortality, and the belief in God.

So this brief life sketch reveals Russell's gradual mental development which started though for a short period of early childhood with freethinking parents later under atheist tutors than

under the guardianship of Christian grand-parents and the critical thinking period which led him to atheism.

Russell's Philosophy of Religion

Russell's philosophy of religion has at least three aspects. The first aspect is related to the definition of religion including its evolution and general treatment. The second one is the criticism of Christianity alone leaving other religions. The third aspect deals with the institutions established in the name of religion viz. Church and this is regarded as an organized form religion and criticism on it.

1. Russell's Concept of Origin of Conventional Religions

a. The Role of 'Rites and Rituals'

Russell expresses his view that "religion" is a word which has no definite meaning.¹² It has a long history having a variety of meanings. In the start it was associated with some rites and rituals which were descended from the ancient past. These were performed for some reasons and some myths were also attached to them to show their importance. Much of them may still be traced.¹³ Some use this term to denote "personal convictions as to morals"¹⁴ or for explaining the nature of the universe.¹⁵ The word "religion" designates other meaning and sense when it is used to illustrate "certain features of historical cultures"¹⁶ and stands for other sense when it is used for the purpose to explain "the attitude of mind".¹⁷ He thought that the use of this term has been unhistorical.

b. The 'Fear Factor'

Russell, contrary to the generally accepted views that beliefs and dogmas make a religion, presents a theory in his article "The Essence of Religion" according to which "it may not belief but feeling that makes religion".¹⁸ The feeling on which religion based is Fear.¹⁹ Fears have different kinds and types e.g. fear of something unknown and mysterious, fear of defeat in war, fear of death etc. so it is the fear on which a religion is had been founded. Moreover, religion is a feeling that in times of troubles and in disputes there is an "elder brother"²⁰ who will stand by you. The sum of the whole history of religion is only this, that it is only an endeavour to diminish or minimize the terror inflicted by the destructive natural-forces.²¹ Russell throws light that why "fear" is the basis of religion. He explains that whatever threatens or creates danger or alarm human existence, it caused fear in the minds and turns thoughts to the necessity of the existence gods or God. Moreover, Battles, Plague, Shipwreck, Air-Crashes or other natural calamities all tend to make people to be religious.²² Throwing light on the primitive religion Russell explains that in the old ages when life was constantly and completely prone to non-human (natural) dangers, that phase was more favorable to the traditional religion. He presents an example that when a fisherman goes to the sea to catch fish his family prayed for his safe return. This type of conditions favoured the traditional religion. So he regards the traditional religions as "an attempt to mitigate the terror inspired by destructive natural forces".²³ So he criticizes religion because he thinks it as mere "a cowardly response to the bleakness of the universe".²⁴

He also gives reference of the book 'The Golden Bough' by Sir J. G. Frazer which reveals that in the early years of agriculture the religion was invented to assure the soil-fertility. Thanks giving, prayers for favor and rain or for favourable weather and a lot of such things illustrate that what were the vital elements of religion. In that age of the infancy of agriculture the farmers thought that either the fertility or the famine and starvation is from god so they perform religious rituals and observe rites to secure the former and prevent the other.²⁵ And it was long ago that the religion was formed to assure the fulfillment of wishes to achieve certain ancient needs. This continued by the power of tradition.²⁶

He explains that fear affects the life in two ways *viz.* directly and indirectly. Due to the former, it effects through creating rumors of disaster especially in the time of war or by imagining the things of terror *e.g.* ghosts etc. and due to the latter way, fear effects by creating belief of something that comforts for example the concept of the Hell for wrongdoers or enemies and the Heaven for themselves. There are many forms of fear *e.g.* fears of death, of darkness of the unknown, of other herds etc. No one can truly think about the matters relating especially to religion until the one can guard one-self against the "myth-making power" of fear. It is the main cause of superstition and also main cause of cruelty.²⁷ He further elaborates religion "as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race".²⁸

c. Desire for Safety

There are some means for avoiding fear. The first is the courage which is so difficult that everyone cannot go beyond certain limit. The second is to persuade oneself that the one is "immune from disaster" this form is the popular one. Such belief of getting security and avoiding fear continued throughout history. In primitive ages, magic was the source to get safety either by injuring and harming the enemies or by feeling protected by spells, talismans and charm papers or by incarnations. This continued in the Babylon and from here to the Alexandrian Empire and from there to Romans. From Romans it descended to Christendom and Islamic areas. Magic was considered, though crude and not very much effective method, but a way to avoid terror but the magicians were regarded as stronger ones than the good persons. So, during the fifteen to seventeen centuries it was the main scene on the stage of history that we see the burning of hundreds of persons male as well as females due to the dread of being sorcerers and witches. Though science has mitigate the faith in magic and the church has regarded it as a sin yet it is practiced.²⁹ In fact the means of avoiding fears caused the acceptance of religion also. According to Russell, everyone can be superstitious who is under the impact of great fear. He mentions that "the sailors who threw Jonah overboard imagined his presence to be the cause of the storm which threatened to wreck their ship."³⁰ The worst side of fear factor is that Fear creates cruelty-impulses and provides such beliefs which justify or rationalize cruelty. None whether a person or a group or a nation who is under the influence of great fear can be trusted to act as humanly or sanely and rationally.³¹ Discussing human nature he says that in religion there are three human impulses embodied. These three embodied impulses are Fear, Conceit and Hatred. And the objective of religion is to give them respectability if they work in "certain channels". But Russell abhors

them, because according to him they are on the whole accountable for human misery and they make “religion is a force for evil”.³²

d. The ‘Social Phenomenon’

Irrespective of the concept of religion, as a consequence of fear or terror or regarding it as a force of evil, he regards “Religion is primarily a social phenomenon”.³³ Moreover, religion being a social phenomenon has two aspects. The first one is personal and the second one is social³⁴ or collective. It is for Protestant a personal aspect while for Catholics it is basically social. For him when these two aspects are combined then religion takes a form of force which can even mould a society.³⁵ In the annals of history it can be seen that this common emotion of religion have swayed even nations. And this is the aspect of religion which occupies a powerful place in society and itself becomes a social institution.³⁶

e. The ‘Herd Instinct’

Russell regards religion as the most significant feature in forming and evolution of society. He thinks religion as determining factor of forming “man’s herd” in the history. He explains that even in now days a Catholic man casts a vote in favour of a Catholic-Capitalist instead of an unbelieving³⁷.

The methods which form herds, ideologies among them are most important. A person in such a herd who do not exhibit the same ideology or theology, he feels himself strange.³⁸ And whatever in society is strange it is dangerous for society. So the effects of herd feeling are so bad. There is another factor which motivates the ‘Herd Instinct’. This is collected fear. This creates ferociousness for others who do not belong to the same herd.³⁹ So in this way also, “religion is a force for evil”⁴⁰

f. Nature of Dogmas

He defined religion as “a set of beliefs held as dogmas” which dominates and conducts the course of life and they are inculcated by the means of emotions and authority not by intellect.⁴¹ Dogmas have been believed because they are thought beneficial and they are considered to facilitate the lives of the followers. They are not valued for their own account. They are supposed to provide escape from the daily cares and the tyranny of life and desires.⁴² Even for the acceptance and in belief in God there is no intellectual or rational basis. People do so because from the early infancy⁴³ they have been taught to belief in God.

g. How dogmas are formed?

Russell describes a myth of the “Sun Child” that throws light on how dogmas are formed. He mentions that in a remote country there arrives a person and lived there for some time. Later he escaped in a balloon. After twenty years he came back and he was astonished that he was worshipped as sun-child. He was believed that he had been ascended into the heavens. And there had been formed a new religion and a new ‘Feast of his Ascension’ had been going to be celebrated. He told the priests that it was he who fled in a balloon but they asked him that he must not tell anyone about that. Because all the moral codes are bound around this myth and if he told them about that he had not ascended to into the heavens then they would lose morality and would turn wicked. So he must leave quietly.⁴⁴ Dogmas are believed that they

“facilitate a certain attitude towards the world”. And they are “habitual direction of our thoughts”⁴⁵

h. Religion as ‘Psychological Solace’

In his opinion there is no argumentative basis in accepting any religion. People accept it “on emotional grounds”.⁴⁶ And there may either be a “wish for safety”⁴⁷ or the feeling of the presence of an “elder brother”⁴⁸ who will look after” in troubles.

i. Definition of Faith.

In the basic dogmas of any religion ‘faith’ is essential element. But Russell provides a peculiar definition of faith. He regards faith “a vice” and further explains that “faith means believing a proposition when there is no good reason for believing it”.⁴⁹ This is to be taken as definition of faith. For example The Hindu’s faith that the world is resting on the elephant and this rests on a tortoise.⁵⁰ And if anyone asks on which thing the tortoise is resting? The Hindu says let us change the topic. So according to Russell, this is faith. He says human beings always use faith whenever there is a doubt or an uncertain situation. No one ever use faith in the multiplication table. But in the times of war when situation is doubtful people say we have faith in the power of our Navy or Army. So where-ever situation is obviously true people never use the faith. He says that is why he calls “faith an evil” due to the reason it means “attaching more meaning to the evidence than it deserves”.⁵¹

Russell regards faith a ‘vice’ and an ‘evil’ but he accepts its positive sides also. In his opinion people should learn that the ‘energy of faith’ makes people to live with the vision of good and let them to work in the world with that vision before them.⁵² He accepts that ‘faith healing occurs’ the patient who have faith in doctor that patient can be cured more easily.⁵³ He also expresses that to minimize the sorrows of human beings, to encourage them in the face miseries, departure of close relatives, dread of death, it is useful ‘to instill faith in hours of despair’.⁵⁴ He defines again that a faith is a religious attitude of a man ‘which directs one’s behavior’.⁵⁵

But the Churches have misused the faith. They hindered the progress in the world because they thought it would ‘destroy faith and disturb social order’.⁵⁶ Moreover it was claimed by every religion that it is only its faith which is true and the rest of all are false and tried to spread it all over the world.⁵⁷ The result was lethal wars and massacre in the name of religion.

j. How ‘Morality’ is associated with religion?

Russell attacks on the myth that people believe “religion makes us virtuous” so it is necessary. Russell describes the above mentioned myth and concludes that to believe that religion makes men virtuous is just a myth. It is also a mere notion that all will turn wicked if they do not accept religion.⁵⁸ If this is so that the Christian religion provides ethical code, this morality has not been practiced by the followers of Christianity so this argument failed.

It is believed that religions are useful in promoting morality. If we define morality as a means to enhance human happiness then it is true that religion is useful.⁵⁹ Because institutional religions want to maintain status quo and provide help to maintain social order so they make

the masses to enjoy unchangeable happier life. In this way institutional religions are useful.⁶⁰ “Thanks to religions there are sophisticated institutions which maintain social order”.

2. Attacks on Christianity

The second aspect of Russell’s philosophy of religion is criticism on Christianity. For this the prominent source is Russell’s Lecture ⁶¹ *Why I am not a Christian*. For Russell’s views on Christianity and his criticism on it, is necessary to inspect this lecture in particular and other works in general. He divides this under the following heads:

- (a) Definition of “Christian”
- (b) Beliefs of Christianity as a religion (God, Immortality, Christ)
- (c) Existence of God
- (d) Analysis of the arguments in favour of the existence of God.
 - (i) Argument of the First Cause
 - (ii) The Natural Law Argument
 - (iii) The Argument of Design
 - (iv) The Moral Argument (from Deity)
 - (v) The Arguments For remedy for Injustice
- (e) The Christ’s Character and his teachings
 - (f) Defects in his teachings
- (g) The Moral Problem and the concept of Hell
- (h) The Emotional Aspect of Religion
 - (i) Fear as the basis of Religion
 - (j) Proposal: What We Can Do?

The objective here, is to know how Russell criticizes Christianity and refuted it and on what grounds. In this he first of all provides the definition of what one mean by the word “Christian”. He says that now a days it is used in a very lose sense. Yet it is supposed that a Christian is a person who tries to live a good life. But he thinks it insufficient to be a Christian because the people who belong to other religions also aim at to live a good life so this is not enough to qualify the term. Consequently he broadens his definition of a ‘Christian’ and said that if anyone wants to be a Christian, the one must accept the following dogmas: Belief in God, Belief in Immortality, and Belief in the Christ (as the best and the wisest person) and Belief in the Hell. He analyzed these dogmas as:

a. **Belief in God (The Theistic Arguments)**

Concerning the belief in God, it is imperative dogma that He exists. Following arguments are presented in support of the belief that proves that God exists. But he rejects all of them in the following manners to prove his idea that all arguments are inconsistent and fallacious.⁶²

(i) **Argument From the First Cause**

The first cause argumnet means that in this world anyone see hat everything has a cause. As further the one can go back, it is reveald that there is a chain of causes untill the one reches at the point that there is “no cause” or it is the first cause. This is what, the expounders call it God.

But Russell says that this argument has no weight. He recalls the incident when he was studying Mill's Autobiography⁶³ where he found a sentence that "Who made me", his father told him that this question cannot be answered because it immediately raises the question "Who made God". This cannot be answered. That was the inconsistency that he found in the argument. He abandoned it and he became atheist.⁶⁴ The notion that "things must have a beginning is really due to the poverty of our imagination". He thinks that there is no compulsion in thinking that the world has come into existence without a cause or it is ever-existent. So this argument is inconsistent. Because it starts with the supposition of a universal causation and finishes with the assumption of an uncaused cause.⁶⁵

(ii) Argument From the Natural Laws

He first distinguishes the natural laws from the human laws. He thinks that there are a great number of human laws that are regarded as natural laws. For example, the human-made measure of three feet to a yard is everywhere a yard comprising three feet. People call it natural law but in fact it is human-made convention. Again, human beings look at the movements of the planets which revolve around the sun. They make an assumption that God has commanded them to move in a certain style. This simple explanation saves them from the further trouble of thinking and seeking more explanation. Resultantly they got satisfaction in the argument from natural laws.

The conception of the law-giver from the natural laws is the result of confusion. The confusion is due to not understanding the difference between the human laws and the natural laws. The former gives you commandments to behave in a certain way. You also may choose to behave in a certain fashion or in other way. But the latter are 'descriptions of how things do in fact behave or do' so you cannot conclude that there is someone who has ordered them to do so. Therefore, the attempt to prove the existence of God from the natural laws argument is not valid.

(iii) Argument from Design

Among the theistic arguments⁶⁶ this has been very popular. Russell puts forward that the theme of the argument is that in this world, everything has been made in a fashion as we can manage to live in it. If the scheme would have been a little different we could not have lived here. The expounders say that the white rabbits have white tails because they could be easily hunted. Russell ironically criticises that what the rabbits think about this purpose of white tail he does not know. The white tail which causes them to be shot by hunters, how it is the best design for them. He rejects the argument from design.

He further analyses that it is not the case that the environment was created to suit the creature but it is vice versa. It was the creatures who make them suitable to live in an environment and this is called adaptability. So there is no validity in the argument presented from design. He quotes Voltaire's ironic comments that 'nose was designed to fit the spectacles'. While the fact is that spectacles were made to fit the nose to rectify the vision. Ayer mentions an event that in a public meeting Russell was asked if after his death he found himself before his maker

then ...? He without any hesitation replied that he would ask, "God! Why did you make the evidence for your existence so insufficient?"⁶⁷

(iv) Argument from Deity or Moral Argument

This argument was formulated by Immanuel Kant and he presented it in his book the 'Critique of Pure Reason'. Russell says there are many forms of this argument. First one is that if there would be no God then there would be no right or wrong. He criticizes that I you believe that this difference between right and wrong is due to God's decree then for God himself there is no difference between right and wrong. So this is not significant argument to present that God is good. Again either God has not created the right and the wrong but they are present or if He has created them then why some things are right or some things are wrong. If He has not created evil then we have to accept a devil that has not been created. So God is not good or is not omnipotent.

(v) Argument for Remedy for Injustice

The followers say that God's existence is necessary to redress the injustice which is seen on the world. The good persons suffer while the wicked flourished here. Thus the existence of God is necessary so that he can punish the culprits and sinners and reward the good ones. Russell makes ironical comment that whether the good are sufferers or the wicked are flourishers but between them which one is more annoying fact. So in this situation of injustice, it is necessary that there must be a God who can redress the injustice of this world into another world. And there should be an after-life in which the good ones who suffered at the earth can get relief on the one hand and the wicked those who enjoyed themselves on the earth may be punished in the after-life. So there must be the Heaven and the Hell as well as God to do justice in the afterlife.

Russell mocks at this hypothesis and says we know only this world. Whatever happens to us we expect such probability next time. He gives example of the crate of oranges. Suppose you bought a crate of oranges and you open it then you found that the whole upper layer in the crate is bad (rotten) then what will you suppose? Either that the underneath layer are also bad or you will suppose that the remaining layers are good to redress the first one? Surly one would result that the remaining layers are also bad. So if we find injustice here in this world we probably suppose that there may be injustice in the world to come. He concludes that this assumption based argument in fact is not in favor of deity but against it.

b. Russell's instances about the Existence of God

Russell concludes that these arguments do not prove the existence of God. He says that though people believe in God but this is only due to the fact that they have been taught from their early days starting from infancy⁶⁸ to believe in God. This believing in God is not any intellectual argument; it is just psychological phenomenon. Human beings wish for safety in the face of calamities and powerful fury of nature. The concept of the existence of God gives them the sense of safety⁶⁹ and a kind of feeling that there is a super power which is more powerful than the present danger. This sense of God's presence gives them the satisfaction of having a big brother⁷⁰ who will take care for them and guard them. So this early

indoctrination and these feelings of having a big brother as well as the wish for safety, play a part in swaying people to believe in God. He explains that why people accept religion is not a matter of argumentation rather there is an emotional factor⁷¹. People accept God and religion due to the above said feelings and on emotional grounds.

c. The Teachings of the Christ as Mentioned in the Gospels

Russell said, for being a Christian it is essential to believe in Christ as at least the best and the wisest man. This belief is taken as for granted. He criticizes his teachings, viz.

*“Resist not evil, but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turns to him the other also”.*⁷²

He says this is not a new concept. Lao-Tse and Buddja has already used it before Christ about five or six hundred years ago. Moreover, those who believe themselves as Christians even do not practice it. He ironically says that he has no doubt that the (then) Prime Minister is not a Christian. But he will not say anybody to go and slap him. Asking no one can imagine what will happen instead of being offered the other cheek. So this teaching of the Christ is impracticable and intended mere a figurative sense. The next quote from Bible,

*“Judge not, lest ye be judged”.*⁷³

He criticizes that this principle is also impracticable. He has known many judges who are staunch Christians but there never shown that they are doing an act which is contrary to the teachings of the Bible and that of Christianity.

d. The Concept of Hell and the Moral Problem

He attacks on the concept of the Hell which is essential element in religion. He says that this is the serious defect in Christ's moral teachings. Christ has described in the Gospels that not only to believe in the Hell but also he threatens those who do not listen to his teachings and preaching. He threatens them of everlasting fire and punishment in Hell.

*“... thrown into hell”.*⁷⁴ And *“.....be thrown into the fire of hell”.*⁷⁵ He warns *“You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell”*⁷⁶. He threatened *“But I will show you whom you should fear: Fear him who, after the killing of the body, has power to throw you into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him”.*⁷⁷

Russell regards this attitude as a moral defect and gives example of Socrates who never threatened anyone who was not ready to listen to him. Instead Socrates always showed quite humane and urbane attitude to them. According to him this is a defect in Christ's moral character. He regards this as a very common behavior of preachers.

Russell objects the tone as described in the Gospel, used by the Christ for those who did not like to listen to his teachings viz. *“ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell”. “You snakes! You brood of vipers! How will you escape being condemned to hell?”*⁷⁸

In his eyes, Christ was not a kind man. He cites⁷⁹ two examples first one of the swine where Christ showed no kindness to the swine and put the devil into them. Though he was able to let the devils to go away simply but by putting devil into them and made them to rush to the sea and died into the water.

*“Some distance from them a large herd of pigs was feeding. The demons begged Jesus, “If you drive us out, send us into the herd of pigs.” He said to them, “Go!” So they came out and went into the pigs, and the whole herd rushed down the steep bank into the lake and died in the water”.*⁸⁰

The second example is of the fig tree. Christ felt hungry and saw a fig tree a far away he went near to the tree and found no fig except leaves because that was not fruit season. But he cursed the tree and that tree withered away.

*“Seeing a fig-tree by the road, he went up to it but found nothing on it except leaves. Then he said to it, “May you never bear fruit again!” Immediately the tree withered”.*⁸¹ And: *“Seeing in the distance a fig-tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves, because it was not the season for figs. Then he said to the tree, “May no-one ever eat fruit from you again.” And his disciples heard him say it”.*⁸²

Discussing Christ’s moral character and throwing light on the need of the concept of the hell, everlasting fire and punishment for those human who did not listen to him, causing animals to death while he was able to avoid that and the curse of the tree which did not give him fruit out of season, Russell tries to prove that Christ was neither in the matters of virtue nor in the issues of wisdom occupied the place higher than the Buddha and the Socrates.⁸³

3. The Church: As an Organized Form of Religion

a. Two types of Religion

Russell described two aspects of ‘Religion’. First is ‘Personal Religion’ and the second is ‘Institutional Religion’.⁸⁴ By ‘Personal Religion’, he means such things those effect man’s inner beliefs and attitudes. And by the ‘Institutional Religion’ he means those things which effect public life and society. We may ask questions about personal religion such question as: are the personal religions true? Or should we believe in them? But about the institutional religions, the questions change their tone. For them we may ask, are institutional religions useful for society? Or do we need them? The institutional regions take place into two forms. First one is that they appeared on the scene of history and descended down but their origin is unknown. The others are those whose origin is traceable and they were founded by individuals.

He criticizes institutional religions for that every religion declares itself the true religion but all the rest are falls. Each of them wants to expend itself all over the world. He regards China fortunate because there existed different religions simultaneously and they are tolerant to others for example Confucianism and Buddhism. But the rest of the world’s religions do not tolerate each others. Each one regards itself as the only truth holder. So other religions are regarded as false and are rejected. Resultantly there are severe wars in the name of religion. He thinks that Institutional religions have their own specific customs and they regard other religions as ‘Heresies’. They also want the whole world to believe in them as the only upholder of truths and the remaining all others as false (as heretics).⁸⁵

He regards Christianity as a religion which is known for her ever inclination for persecution tendency. There is a long history of the persecutions of heretics, Jews, freethinkers and

scientists. There is also a long history of cruelty inflicted on innocent women due to the alleged reason that they were witches.⁸⁶

b. Churches' Role in the History

If this is the situation then anyone may ask, is such type of religion is useful as a social institution for a society or is it useful for national survival? Russell replies that such type of religions in the past had been very effective in waging wars and in fact they played a lethal role in the history.⁸⁷ So such types of institution are not useful for a liberal and prospering society. Institutional religions had always aimed at preserving status quo and believed in maintaining existing social orders so they support conservatism which hindered new ideas and innovations in social institutions. It was made a belief that progress and innovation in thought would harm the faith and upset social order. So the result was the belief that progress in thinking was not compatible with religious conservatism. Resultantly new ideas were to be sacrificed that halted and arrested the progress.⁸⁸ These types of institutional religions are detrimental for the society instead of benefiting it.

c. Two causes those damaged the Churches' prestige

He analyses the idea that was propagated by the Church that the Clergymen were more virtuous than the rest of society. They excelled in virtue while the rest are below to them. Russell says this idea harmed the church. Like this, the other one that harmed the Clerical profession was endowments. Property was available to those who supported an institution. But on the other hand those who support had the tendency to influence and mould the judgments of those who had great positions or themselves were regarded as institutions. These two were the main causes that played the role in damaging the moral force of the Church.⁸⁹ It is not the case that the creeds of the church are so much wrong. But the wrong is in exercising of the creed.

d. Churches' Policy Towards Social Problems

He claims that the institution of the Church has always been main adversary of moral progress. Church always resisted every movement of improvement in the criminal law for example the gradual abolishing the capital punishment. It opposed the reduction of wars, slavery and economic justice.⁹⁰ The worst side of the church is explicit in its attitude towards sex. In every instance it discourages people for this pleasure and curbs this basic instinct.⁹¹ The opposition of birth control by the Catholic Church caused the lives of women miserable. Church regarded sexual intercourse as wicked action unless it is done with the object and desire of progeny. If any woman married to a person who had any sexual disease viz. syphilitic etc. then according to Catholic Church it is 'indissoluble sacrament' to live with the same person and she could not take any precaution to prevent the birth of other disease affected children.⁹² Churches made sex a form of pain rather than a basic pleasure and human need. If a women does not adopt birth control because it was not allowed by the church then the frequent pregnancies will worn out her and resultant she expires. So how she gets pleasure from her married life? What she receives, is only pain.⁹³

He concludes that in the human history every act of progress was hindered by the church. It may be either in the field of human feeling or in the criminal law, decreasing of war, treatment of colored races, lessening of slavery, progress in the moral field everything was opposed by the church. He expresses his theory about the religion Christianity as organized in the churches has always been a 'principal enemy of moral progress.'⁹⁴ In the field he Church opposed Galileo and Darwin and in present times it is against Freud. At the time of its zenith it went too far in its opposition of knowledge. Russell quotes Pope Gregory's letter to a bishop; "a report has reached us which we cannot mention without a blush, that thou expounds grammar to certain friends". The bishop was forced to stop this 'wicked labour'.⁹⁵

e. Benefits of Churches

As Russell regards religion a thing born due to the 'fear' factor and a 'disease' and also a 'source of untold misery' of human beings so how he can view any good in it. But he is a rational thinker so he points out that there is still positive side of this 'disease'. He professes that he does not deny the genuine contributions of religion and the Church. One of them is that they helped in making solar and lunar observations to predict eclipses and contributed in making calendar. So he is ready to accept and acknowledge these two services *e.g.* help in making calendar and contribution to the knowledge of prediction of solar and lunar eclipses rendered by the church.⁹⁶ Moreover it preserved everything which was significant in the Greek, Jewish and in the Roman civilization.⁹⁷

3. Russell's Rejection of Religion

Russell's rejection of religion in general and the rejection of Christianity are due to following reasons:

First one is psychological reason. Because he thinks that there are not present any 'cogent or persuasive intellectual grounds' for believing in religion or Christianity. He thinks that the reverence for tradition, fear of calamities, need for security and desire for the want of something which is not present are sufficient reasons to hold any religion.⁹⁸

Second reason for what he rejected Christianity is related to Church's moral decrees. He presents the example of a girl who gets married with a syphilitic man and she is bound to give birth to other effected children but she cannot get divorce because the church has prohibited it. Other example is the prohibition of birth control. Due to this a women cannot refuse to bear a child till she worn out and dies due to too much pregnancies. So he says churches are the main enemy of moral progress and rejects Christianity. "The fact is that religion is no longer sufficiently vital to take hold of anything new". It was formed in the past to fulfill certain needs and was supported by the reverence for traditions and it is not capable to hold anything which cannot be viewed in the light of traditions. The cause that "lessened the vitality" and made religion unable to survive in modern times is attributable to science.⁹⁹

It is religion that prevents from acquiring rational knowledge. It may be that mankind is at the threshold of the gates of golden age. If it is so then it is indispensable "to slay the dragon that guards the door, and this dragon is religion".¹⁰⁰

4. Russell's Positive Views about Religion

Every reader who is familiar with the name of Bertrand Russell knows him as an atheist, heretic or at least agnostic. But in fact this opinion is due to the superficial reading and pre-decided indoctrination that he was atheist or enemy of religion. It is right that he was against religions and the churches but only those which are traditional ones because they hinder the human progress. The other reason may be that they cannot help human progress in modern society. So whatever has been written above on Russell's explicit yet negative thoughts about religion is sufficient. Now let me pen down about his scattered, hidden, and positive concepts on religion.

It is clear that he was against Christianity as a religion and against the Church as an organized form of religion. But the question is that whether he was against the essence of religion?

- a. Every religion has at least two aspects. First one is its Faiths *e.g.* God / gods, Prophets, Prayers, Church/ Mosques/ Temples/ Scriptures etc. as Russell finds in Christianity so we may call him atheist or agnostic because he is against and enemy all of them. The second aspect of religion is its values and morality which contributes to the characters of its followers. I hope we all agree that this aspect of religion *e.g.* concern about values and their dignity is common factor in every religion. Regarding Russell if we look the first aspect then he was surely atheist or agnostic or enemy of religion. But if we keep in view the second aspect Russell valued religion as a religious man. So inquiry about Russell's ideas about religion is in fact investigation about his attitude towards values.¹⁰¹
- b. Anyone who has surveyed Russell's works thoroughly, the one will be aware the two facts: one is that he was surly in opposition to traditional religions and he was wholeheartedly devoted to the values which he acknowledged. First value which he accepts is the truth and others are human happiness, justice, freedom, co-operation etc. In case, if we accept the second aspect of religion as mentioned above regarding values then "Russell's life and thought are religious".¹⁰²
- c. As he wrote that he "suffered acutely from the gradual loss of faith" and he also thought that if he "ceased to believe in God, freedom and immortality" he would be very unhappy.¹⁰³ He said that his grand-mother had given him a Bible¹⁰⁴ also which had her favourite text written on the fly-leaf which he still possessed. And the ethical maxims of Christianity also have impacts on him. So Brightman concludes that "religion has had positive and profound influence on Russell".¹⁰⁵
- d. He advocates the necessity of religion as Brightman mentions, "for those to whom dogmatic religion can no longer bring comfort, there is need of some substitute". Here he is explicitly aspires for non-dogmatic religion.
- e. Regarding the knowledge of values he rejects his scientific method and declares that science is not capable to decide the status of values due to the fact that they lay "outside the realm of truth and falsehood" so they cannot be decided intellectually.¹⁰⁶

He says, "Science has nothing to say about 'values'".¹⁰⁷ The world of the nature is other thing and the world and philosophy of value is something else. Nothing else but only harm can come if we confuse them.¹⁰⁸ So, whatever "science cannot discover, mankind cannot know".¹⁰⁹ But he is still in search of highest good as he said, "mind...becomes capable of that union with the universe which constitutes its highest good".¹¹⁰ He said, though the concept of God and the immortality has no support in science,¹¹¹ yet belief in the former "serves to humanize the world of nature" and makes men feel that there is a force which is their ally.¹¹²

- f. Moreover there is the concept of prayer. This entails that there is a God, this world is being controlled by Him. By the prayers the God can be moved. So we have an omnipotent ally with us. So miracles happen to benefit human beings. Same way the concept of immortality lessens the fear of death. Those who believe in it they feel a satisfaction that whenever they would die there would be an eternal blessing so this concept soothes human fears.¹¹³ Subsequently it is clear that he accepts religious values and the importance of religion. In fact "religion has had a positive and profound influence" on him.¹¹⁴
- g. Brightman quotes from the book "*In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays*" that Russell said "modern democracy has derived strength from the moral ideals of Christianity" and "we owe to Christianity a certain respect for individual". Russell also mentions that "the world owes something to the Gospels".¹¹⁵ Again he had good notions for religion that "The great religions aim at virtue".¹¹⁶ Though some seek either salvation, union with God or union with the universe. The great religions which intended universality replaced the cults whether national or tribal of early ages and regarded men as men not as mere Jews or Christians, free or slaves. The sympathy of the founders was universal.¹¹⁷

All the above concepts which Russell expounded in his different books show that he in his ideas about values (on which he laid the foundation of his scattered religious theory which I have named second aspect of religion in contrast to traditional religion) is influenced by religions. According to Brightman "here is ample proof of a high appreciation of religion than appears in the more hostile utterances."¹¹⁸ This too is clear that Russell "is visibly groping for a non-dogmatic religion".¹¹⁹

5. Russell's Solution

He suggests that if religion would be like a society of friends which might be run by those who have other professions for earning they would be more suitable for working for religion with real enthusiasm and without accepting any payments.¹²⁰ Moreover such persons who had contact in the outer world and everyday life rather than limited to only church, they are less prone to remote morality which would be not applicable to modern life. They would not be bound to deduce pre-drawn conclusions. They would be able to judge moral and religious questions without bias and on genuine basis. He concludes that no religious life is really livable or useful until it is liberated from the "incubus of professional priesthood".¹²¹

Brightman says that Russell wants “a new religion, based upon liberty, justice and love, not upon authority and law and hell-fire”¹²². Brightman shows his appreciation that “Such genuinely religious ideas and experiences reveal a side of Russell that is unexpected by many of his readers”.¹²³

He considers that a true religion is which “consists in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavor to make our fellow-creatures happy”.¹²⁴ Russell aspires that religion must be “like the Society of Friends”.¹²⁵ He clarifies that a good life is one which is “inspired by love and guided by knowledge”.¹²⁶ He regards religion as a “social phenomenon”¹²⁷ and as a “social institution”¹²⁸. He also suggests that a religion must not be determined for anyone by any authority it must be left to each person’s free choice.¹²⁹

6. Bright man’s analysis and Criticism On Russell

- a. Whatever arguments Russell presented against religion, Brightman makes analysis. Brightman develops equal argument as refutation of Russell’s argument. Firstly, He says, in the past science had been blamed for the loss of lives during childbirth. It does not follow to reject science. Secondly, is it not the fact that the physicians opposed the antiseptic discoveries of Lister and Pasteur? So it does not mean to reject the use of medicine because even the physicians opposed it. So these examples of science and antiseptic medicine given by Brightman are analogous to Russell’s argument and he regards them as refutation of Russell’s arguments.
- b. He asks whether Russell anytime in his life had tried to raise funds or launched any moment to construct a hospital or collected charity for the poor. If he had done so he would have noticed that it was only the religious people who responded without any pressure.¹³⁰ So it is not fact that religion or religious people are enemy of progress. Moreover it is the church which helped humanity in the remotest areas by the missionaries with the commodities and medicine and shelter. So the Church’s roll as a ‘principle enemy of moral progress’, perceived by Russell is not wholly correct view.
- c. Russell’s next attack on Church is that it is supported by the endowments¹³¹ and also that salaries are paid to the priests. Brightman criticizes that Russell’s consideration is very odd, to regard it a defect in religion without viewing that the same thing is present in educaion department or any other spher of life. How a same thing in religion is defect but in other fields the same thing is not defect. So Russell, inergarding it defect is not on the true side. Moreover, if the physicians, writers and teachers are paid then why not the priest should be paid? He regards that Russell’s argument has ‘no logical or ethical force’.¹³²
- d. So far as Christian ethics is concerned Russell regards the maxims in the Christian ethics very exellent but findes them too high for practice that is why they are not so much practiced. Those who believe in the traditional religions they look into the past for inspiration instead of focusing the future. They try to find wisdom in the Christ’s teachings which are praise worthy but insufficient in solving problems of modern societies. For example the problems relating to art, intellect and government has been

ignored in the Gospels. Like Tolstoy, if anyone wants Gospels as a guide for life the one has to accept the ignorant peasants as the best persons and has to set aside all problems of life.¹³³

Brightman objects that if one keeps in mind Russell's great contributions in epistemology and in logic one will expect that he would have used the same method and consideration in the field of religion but he had not done so except casually.¹³⁴

7. Conclusion

The fact must not be ignored that Russell is one of the founders of *Analytic Philosophy* and his approach towards religion reflects the same commitment to logical clarity and empirical evidence. Thus his philosophy of religion cannot be understood without reference to his broader 'Analytic and Philosophical Method'. The nature of the method led him to reject metaphysical systems that could not be verified empirically. Thus he developed his philosophy of religion without appealing to supernatural authority. He trusted on reason, relied upon scientific method, and human experience. His philosophy possesses remarkable intellectual clarity, moral courage, metaphysical reductionism and existential pessimism tinged with Humanism.

Regarding Russell's philosophy about religion, Brightman¹³⁵ says that his thoughts about religion mean attacks on Christianity only. Russell said little about the essence of religion or about what makes something, 'a religion'. Though he discussed three component *viz.* Creed, Church, Morality, etc. which are essential ingredients of every religion but they are discussed with reference to Christianity. Brightman says that it seems that Russell wants to impress others only by showing that he is concerned only to reject than to define, concerned to express his dislike than to expound an explanation of what is Christianity.¹³⁶

Brightman raises a question. Has he ever given any consistent philosophy of religion? He himself gives reply that he has not done so. Regarding Russell's interest in logic, mathematics, ethics, epistemology and politics Brightman says that Russell had given "less rigorous attention" to this topic. When Brightman's article, 'Russell's Philosophy of Religion' was published in the book 'the Philosophy of Bertrand Russell' in 1944, he quoted an event that by a group of students he was asked the same and Russell "hardly recalled¹³⁷ having written on the subject other than..." 'Free man's worship and 'Religion and Science'. But also says that whatever Russell had written till that time it was more than the whole works of many other man. And Russell's that work was sufficient to produce hot discussions rather acrimonious debates.¹³⁸ But after that (1944) Russell lived more than three decades and written much not only on other topics but on religion and philosophy of religions also.

As contrary to the generally known view about Russell as being atheist or agnostic, it is astonishing fact that he occupies a better place than the pragmatists. He shows emotional attachment and respect to religion and excludes it from the pragmatists' approach. He says that he "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".¹³⁹

Grayling says that “it comes as a surprize to people”¹⁴⁰ when people know that Russell was not an atheist¹⁴¹ who rejects the existance of God rather he was agnostic. There may be Diety, he accepts the posibility but he regards it “highly probable”.¹⁴² He is known to the world as an agnostic.True, he is and we accept it. The question arises if he is an agnostic or as some say him atheist, then why he aspires for heavens, beauty, welfare of humanity, peace in the world and for what he aspires moral values and ethical principles. Are not these vales desierd by any religion? If they are demanded by religions then Russell is a religious man having a philosophy of religion and if these values are not desired by any religion then he is not religious, an atheist and against religion.

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