

DID RUSSELL HAVE A PERSONAL RELIGION?

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Louis Greenspan and Stefan Andersson, eds. *Russell on Religion: Selections from the Writings of Bertrand Russell*. London and New York: Routledge, 1999. Pp. vii, 261. Cloth £40.00; pb \$12.99.

To the general observer, Bertrand Russell's opinions on religion are simple enough: Russell was that outspoken "atheist" who *hated* religion—especially Christianity—and sputtered against its alleged evils every chance he got. But as one takes a closer look, complications begin to emerge; the firebrand seems to allow some nuances, after all. We have a new opportunity to reevaluate Russell's religious views (and our view of those views), a collection of his writings on the subject entitled *Russell on Religion*. The book is another installment in Routledge's "Russell on ..." series. And as the first number, *Russell on Ethics*, edited by Charles Pigden, showed us that the philosopher had thought more about metaethics than was previously imagined, this one shows us that Russell had many interesting and complex things to say about religion.

The editors are well known to those who travel in Russellian circles. Louis Greenspan is the former director of the Bertrand Russell Editorial Project, as well as professor emeritus at McMaster University's Department of Religious Studies. Stefan Andersson is a frequent researcher at the Bertrand Russell Archives.

The twenty-two essays are arranged by broad topics, starting with some "personal statements" and then "religion and ...": "philosophy", "science", "morality", and "history". Greenspan and Andersson supply brief introductions to the sections that help place each essay. In the book's introduction they provide an overview and seek to show that Russell essentially was religious in his personality (which this reviewer thinks goes too far, but we'll get to that).

As for the selected writings themselves, the editors have chosen well. Yes, many of the old gems are here—"The Free Man's Worship" (1903), "Why I Am Not a Christian" (1927)—but so are some rather obscure and rather brilliant texts such as "The Existence and Nature of God" (1939). Some popular essays missing in action—"Can Religion Cure Our Troubles?" (1954), "Do We Survive Death?" (1936), and (the lengthy) *What I Believe* (1925)—were included in an earlier collection that had a much greater emphasis on Russell's opposition to religion, *Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* (1957), edited by Paul Edwards.

It's well known that Russell changed his opinions on many subjects (a trait his foes view as a vice, his friends as a virtue). Taken in their totality, the essays in this new volume show that he changed his views on religion, though it is difficult to get at exactly how this played out because the pieces are not arranged chronologically. But this book is invaluable in revealing the seriousness with which Russell approached the subject and the complexity of his conclusions.

Russell could be cautious in his criticisms of religion, admitting, for example, that he couldn't prove there was no God. He usually referred to himself as an agnostic. His answers to *Look* magazine's questions on "What Is an Agnostic?" (1953) are included, and show that he relied on an old view that "An atheist, like a Christian, holds that we *can* know whether or not there is a God" (p. 41). Many atheists would disagree, holding that they simply reject the arguments for the existence of a God—and have no need of that hypothesis.

Yet, the caustic critic is also here and it makes one pine for such a public opponent of religion to come around again; let's face it, Russell is a lot more fun to read when he's bashing religion than when he's saying nice things about it.

In their introduction, Greenspan and Andersson try to reconcile Russell's polar-opposite takes on religion. On the one hand, there is his daughter's opin-

ion that “He was by temperament a profoundly religious man”¹ and his own statement (in “Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilizations?” [1929]) that he regards religion “as a disease born of fear and as a source of untold misery to the human race” (p. 169).

The editors write that Russell “seeks to situate himself between dogmatism and utter scepticism” (p. 8). They make the distinction (as Russell did) between a personal religion and an institutional one, including its dogma. They point out that in *Religion and Science* (1935), Russell distinguishes three different senses of religion: “Church, creed and religious feeling” (p. 13). Clearly, Russell hated the institution of the Church and (because of its irrational nature) its creed, or theology. But it’s difficult to get at what he meant by a “personal religion”. Rather than “religious feeling”, what Russell actually writes of in *Religion and Science* is the historical religions’ “code of personal morals”.²

In his “Reply to Criticisms” (part of which is included here) from *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell* (1944), edited by Paul Arthur Schilpp, Russell calls the third prong “a man’s serious personal beliefs, in so far as they have to do with the nature of the world and the conduct of life.” It is here that he writes, “... although I consider some form of personal religion highly desirable, and feel many people unsatisfactory through the lack of it, I cannot accept the theology of any well-known religion, and I incline to think that most Churches at most times have done more harm than good” (pp. 28–9).

Unfortunately, Russell doesn’t say much more about what he means by a personal religion because he believes that the “critic” of his religious philosophy, Edgar Sheffield Brightman, has done a good job of explaining it; Brightman says Russell’s personal religion relies on “a [mystical] sense of infinity, a sense of membership in the whole, resignation, and social justice”. Like Russell’s daughter, Brightman finds of the philosopher: “... at bottom he has been a more religious man than his theories or his attacks on religion would suggest.”³

But is it correct to call Russell’s outlook a religion? Why not call it a “personal philosophy” or “personal worldview”, except for the purpose of leaning in favour of religion in general? Most people have a general idea of what religion means (usually involving a belief in a higher being). To call Russell’s outlook a religion is to invite misunderstanding. It’s similar to the misunderstanding that occurred when Russell wrote in *The Impact of Science on Society* (1952) of the need for “love, Christian love, or compassion” (p. 17); he was taken to have changed his anti-Christian views, but this was mistaken. John Dewey was similarly misunderstood to advocate traditional belief when he defined God as “the

synthesis of man’s highest precepts”. It would be wise to stick to the standard meanings of words, especially when it comes to such a hot topic. (Russell disagreed, by the way, saying, “I should say if Dewey likes to use the word God he has a right to use it, as any person has a right to use it” [p. 106].)

Elsewhere, Russell seems to denigrate the notion of any religion. In “The Essence and Effect of Religion” (1921) he defines religions as “beliefs with many dogmas which direct human behaviour and are neither based on—nor contradict—real evidence”, adding that “the method employed by religions to direct people’s minds are [*sic*] based on sentiment or power rather than reason.” He asks whether something essential to religion is maintained “after the harmful dogmas are eliminated” (p. 74). His answer is no. So if I understand him correctly, he is not a proponent of personal religion here.

Russell’s adolescent journey toward religious scepticism is well known. In “My Mental Development” (1944) he speaks of his loss of faith in—in succession—free will, immortality and God. (He also speaks of his desire to replace religion with philosophy, a project that didn’t quite work out.)

Clearly—and counterintuitively—he was more sympathetic to religion as a young man than as an old one. In the familiar “Mysticism and Logic” (1914), written under the influence of his mistress, Lady Ottoline Morrell, who was religious, Russell defines mysticism as “little more than a certain intensity and depth of feeling in regard to what is believed about the universe” (p. 110). While Russell rejects mysticism’s central beliefs—in intuition and unity, and against the reality of time and evil—he still has something good to say about it. “[T]here is an element of wisdom to be learned from the mystical way of feeling, which does not seem to be attainable in any other manner”, he writes. “If this is the truth, mysticism is to be commended as an attitude towards life, not as a creed about the world” (p. 116).

“The Essence of Religion” (1912) is a rather obscure essay, which Russell would not allow to be reprinted because he thought it was “too religious” (it does, however, appear in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*). In it, Russell examines what is at the crux of religion in a time when its traditional manifestations are disappearing. He writes—in a statement that may be viewed as supporting “personal religion”—that “it may be not belief but feeling that makes religion.” He goes on: “It is the quality of infinity that makes religion, the selfless, untrammelled life in the whole which frees men from the prison-house of eager wishes and little thoughts” (p. 57).

Sounding at his most (disappointingly) mystical, Russell examines what he calls the three elements of Christianity that are desirable to save: worship, acquiescence, and love. He writes: “Worship is given by Christianity to God; acquiescence [in private griefs and the larger evil] is given to the inevitable because it is the will of God; love is enjoined towards my neighbours, my enemies, and, in

¹ Katharine Tait, *My Father Bertrand Russell* (London: Harcourt Brace, 1975), p. 184.

² *Religion and Science* (1935; New York and Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1997), p. 8.

³ Brightman, “Russell’s Philosophy of Religion”, in Schilpp, pp. 552, 553.

fact, towards all men" (p. 61). And more on infinity: "The essence of religion, then, lies in subordination of the finite part of our life to the infinite part" (p. 68).

In "Religion and the Churches", part of the 1916 lectures that made up *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, Russell has more positive things to say about religion. He writes that sincere believers "are valuable to the world because they keep alive the conviction that the life of the spirit is what is of most importance to men and women. Some of them, in all the countries now at war, have had the courage to preach peace and love in the name of Christ, and have done what lay in their power to mitigate the bitterness of hatred. All praise is due to these men, and without them the world would be even worse than it is" (pp. 155–6).

But then the war ends and the 1920s arrive and in the contest known as Russell versus Religion, the gloves come off.

Greenspan and Andersson call "Why I Am Not a Christian", a lecture Russell gave in 1927, "Russell's most incendiary anti-religious writing" (p. 53). They suggest it marked a change in Russell's tone from his earlier, more sympathetic (and, I'd add, purpler) essays. In the Introduction to Part 2 ("Religion and Philosophy"), the editors remind us of the responses and heated debate this piece of writing engendered (one response was entitled *The Unreasonableness of Anti-Christianity: a Reply to "Why I Am Not a Christian"*).

Here we find a much more straightforward Russell ("There is one very serious defect to my mind in Christ's moral character, and that is that he believed in hell" [p. 86]). The essay truly fits into the "Religion and Philosophy" category since Russell takes on the classic arguments for the existence of God and finds them—and Him—wanting. The essay is strong on Russell's belief that the Churches have been bad for moral progress and that the basis of religion is fear.

"The Existence and Nature of God" (1939) is another gem. It first appeared in the *Collected Papers* and is from a lecture at the University of Michigan. Since Russell doubts God's existence, he doesn't waste much breath on his nature, except to explore some changing conceptions of the deity, such as the disappearing belief among Protestants in his omnipotence. Yet, even at this late date, Russell is saying that he values the emotional aspect of mysticism but not the unsupported beliefs that stem from that emotion. In this lecture he also says: "I think faith is a vice, because faith means believing a proposition when there is no good reason for believing it. That may be taken as a definition of faith. But the great majority of Christian virtues I most wholeheartedly accept, and wish to see perpetuated" (p. 94). But he goes on to point out Christian vices.

Greenspan and Andersson have done a great service in bringing us a vehicle

through which to take another look at Russell's religious writings. The philosopher's disdain for the Church and its theology—and especially their impediment to social and intellectual progress—is plain for all to see. Readers will have to decide for themselves whether his views about an internal life add up to a "personal religion".