



Religion and Science

Bertrand Russell , Michael Ruse (Introduction)

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In this timely work, Russell, philosopher, agnostic, mathematician, and renowned peace advocate, offers a brief yet insightful study of the conflicts between science and traditional religion during the last four centuries. Examining accounts in which scientific advances clashed with Christian doctrine or biblical interpretations of the day, from Galileo and the Copernican Revolution, to the medical breakthroughs of anesthesia and inoculation, Russell points to the constant upheaval and reevaluation of our systems of belief throughout history. In turn, he identifies where similar debates between modern science and the Church still exist today. This classic is sure to interest all readers of philosophy and religion, as well as those interested in Russell's thought and writings.

Religion and Science Details

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didn't happen to know first that he's a wanker, you might even start believing him. Not this little black duck. I've been to a Bertrand Russell School and wankers doesn't begin to cover it. Only a jolly big wanker could have come up with the idea of a type of school where the kids and the teachers all thought they were very special indeed.

In his opinion, science deals with facts and the truth, the rest of what we do - and I guess he is bagging his own discipline here - is just matter of opinion and some people shout louder than others. I was rather shocked to read, when he is discussing Nietzsche's idea that most men are just animals and there are supermen above them:

We have here a sharp disagreement of great practical importance, but we have absolutely no means, of a scientific or intellectual kind, by which to persuade either party that the other is in the right. There are, it is true, ways of altering men's opinions on such subjects, but they are all emotional, not intellectual.....questions as to 'values' lie wholly outside the domain of knowledge.

Hence my moaning. My 'Oh Bertrand'. Three of us sat there mulling over this. Anna, who is a physicist, clearly thought equality of man was something that could be intellectually demonstrated. Manny was doubting that this meant Bertrand would be racist. Me, I'm thinking we'll see about that.

If you go to the wiki page on Bertrand, one of the things you see is this:

On 16 November 1922, for instance, he gave a lecture to the General Meeting of Dr. Marie Stopes's Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress on "Birth Control and International Relations," in which he described the importance of extending Western birth control worldwide; his remarks anticipated the population control movement of the 1960s and the role of the United Nations.

This policy may last some time, but in the end under it we shall have to give way—we are only putting off the evil day; the one real remedy is birth control, that is getting the people of the world to limit themselves to those numbers which they can keep upon their own soil... I do not see how we can hope permanently to be strong enough to keep the coloured races out; sooner or later they are bound to overflow, so the best we can do is to hope that those nations will see the wisdom of Birth Control.... We need a strong international authority.

—"Lecture by the Hon. Bertrand Russell", Birth Control News, vol 1, no. 8 (December 1922), p.2

Another passage from early editions of his book Marriage and Morals (1929), which Russell later claimed to be referring only to environmental conditioning, and which he significantly modified in later editions, reads:

In extreme cases there can be little doubt of the superiority of one race to another[...] It seems on the whole fair to regard Negroes as on the average inferior to white men, although for work

in the tropics they are indispensable, so that their extermination (apart from the question of humanity) would be highly undesirable.

—Bertrand Russell, *Marriage and Morals*, pg. 266 (1929)

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Responding in 1964 to a correspondent's inquiry, "Do you still consider the Negroes an inferior race, as you did when you wrote *Marriage and Morals*?", Russell replied:

I never held Negroes to be inherently inferior. The statement in *Marriage and Morals* refers to environmental conditioning. I have had it withdrawn from subsequent editions because it is clearly ambiguous.

—Bertrand Russell, letter dated 17 March 1964 in *Dear Bertrand Russell... a selection of his correspondence with the general public, 1950–1968*. edited by Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969, p. 146)

Ambiguous? This is just a straightforward lie on Russell's part. He quite clearly saw black people as inherently inferior and in his essay on *Ethics in War*, he states this unambiguously, posing the question:

Are there any wars which achieve so much for the good of mankind as to outweigh all the evils...?

and surely his pompous answer will make you gasp too:

By a 'war of colonization' I mean a war whose purpose is to drive out the whole population of some territory and replace it by an invading population of a different race. Ancient wars were very largely of this kind, of which we have a good example in the Book of Joshua. In modern times the conflicts of Europeans with American-Indians, Maories, and other aborigines in temperate regions, have been of this kind. Such wars are totally devoid of technical justification, and are apt to be more ruthless than any other war. Nevertheless, if we are to judge by results, we cannot regret that such wars have taken place. They have the merit, often quite fallaciously claimed for all wars, of leading in the main to the survival of the fittest, and it is chiefly through such wars that the civilized portion of the world has been extended from the neighborhood of the Mediterranean to the greater part of the earth's surface. The eighteenth century, which liked to praise the virtues of the savage and contrast them with the gilded corruption of courts, nevertheless had no scruple in thrusting the noble savage out from his North American hunting grounds. And we cannot at this date bring ourselves to condemn the process by which the American continent has been acquired for European civilization. In order that such wars may be justified, it is necessary that there should be a very great and undeniable difference between the civilization of the colonizers and that of the dispossessed natives. It is necessary also that the climate should be one in which the invading race can flourish. When these conditions are satisfied the conquest becomes justified, though the actual fighting against the dispossessed inhabitants ought, of course, to be avoided as far as is compatible with colonizing. Many humane people will object in theory to the justification of this form of robbery, but I do not think that any practical or effective objection is likely to be made.

Such wars, however, belong now to the past. The regions where the white men can live are all allotted, either to white races or to yellow races to whom the white man is not clearly superior, and whom, in any case, he is not strong enough to expel. Apart from small punitive expeditions, wars of colonization, in the true sense, are no longer possible. What are nowadays called colonial wars do not aim at the complete occupation of a country by a conquering race; they aim only at securing certain governmental and trading advantages. They belong, in fact, rather with what I call wars of prestige, than with wars of colonization in the old sense. There are, it is true, a few rare exceptions. The Greeks in the second Balkan war conducted a war of colonization against the Bulgarians; throughout a certain territory which they intended to occupy, they killed all the men, and carried off all the women. But in such cases, the only possible justification fails, since there is no evidence of superior civilization on the side of the conquerors.

This speaks for itself, doesn't it? But nonetheless, let me say WOW. I realise that Russell lived in a time where it was normal to think black people were inferior, but he lived in a time when women were believed to be as well and yet he was outspoken for the idea of a better deal for women. Maybe it was as simple as he was going to get a shag out of the one and not out of the other, though in general intellectuals are more likely to be the other way, champions for man's equality but not women's.

In his review of this book, Manny says

Science, argues Russell, cannot pronounce on ethics, but this is for the simple reason that statements in the realm of ethics are not within the purview of objective knowledge in the first place: they can always be paraphrased as expressions of personal desire or preference, and hence are purely subjective. This argument is probably well known to modern philosophers, but I had not seen it before and Russell puts the case nicely.

But if Russell is saying that science cannot pronounce on ethics, he is also and much more importantly saying that only science can be the arbiter of truth and that if one cannot prove something with the basic methodology of science, it cannot be true, it can only be a matter of opinion. This belief he has, not only gives science exclusive - and dangerous - prerogative to own the truth, it also gives everybody else the right to do as they please, because nothing can be proved, nothing is 'true' outside the purview of science.

So when Manny says:

In the conclusion, Russell suddenly sobers up and tells you what he's really talking about. It's not the Christian Church; it's the new religions of Fascism and Communism, which, as he says, have already killed more intellectual dissidents than the Church did in the last three centuries. You remember that he's writing shortly before World War II. He can see what most people are still trying to pretend isn't there, and he has every reason to be desperately worried. All the clowning around was just to get your attention; you thought you'd avoided being fooled, but he's tricked you at a deeper level than you were expecting. Nice work, Russell.

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Menglong Youk says

In spite of the title, the book provides readers more than just the conflict between science and religion. Bertrand Russell took us to explore soul, body, mysticism, logic, determinism and the relationship between science, ethic and education. Although I have read books regarding these issues before, this piece of writing refreshes what I've known and filled me with new angle to approach the the problems.

Ahmad Sharabiani says

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Mark says

With a title like "Religion and Science" one might be apt to believe that this is a book of comparative essays, conflicting viewpoints one might say. However, what Russell really does is to offer first a historical view of religion's relationship with science and then in latter writings, how that relationship went wrong.

From metaphysical meanderings to epistemological epiphanies Russell points out that the truth of the matter is: religion has been in the business of either editing or censoring science ever since the times of Galileo and Copernicus. Russell's point is well taken that while it is true that religious figures have played an important role in the sciences of the middle-ages, their intentions and motivations were not scientific, but rather religious in nature.

The essays in this collection point out that intentions and motivations are both important and definitive with defining, comparing and contrasting religious and scientific viewpoints. With is usual candor and british wit, Russell offers an easy to read and short collection of interesting essays.

Manny says

Bertrand Russell was an extremely intelligent, witty and entertaining writer, and I enjoyed most of this book in the way I would have enjoyed a very good comment thread on Goodreads; perhaps the book in question was the Bible, or *The God Delusion*, or one of Ann Coulter's more demented outpourings. Russell has set the ball rolling with a provocative review, designed to tease and infuriate people with religious sympathies; he then proceeds to dispatch the resulting army of trolls, to the amusement of all those who consider themselves skeptical about religion. "You really ought to turn it into a book!" says some well-meaning participant towards the end of the debate. Everyone has forgotten this remark five minutes after it's been made. But Russell, to general amazement, comes back a couple of weeks later and says he's done it and uploaded the result to Smashwords: it's available for \$1.99. A few people download the PDF and post reviews saying it's pretty damn good, and it proceeds to sell a fair number of copies.

As the title suggests, the book undertakes to examine various areas in which Religion and Science find themselves in conflict with each other, and considers the grounds on which we might prefer one to the other; I trust no one will be surprised to see Science winning every round. After a brief introduction, Russell gives you a broad hint at what he's planning in the second chapter, which is largely concerned with Galileo and his battle against the nefarious forces of the Inquisition. Russell expresses his admiration for Galileo's *Dialogues on the Two Greatest Systems of the World*, a transparently rigged pretence at an even-handed comparison of

the geocentric and heliocentric systems, and then borrows all Galileo's rhetorical devices: he confuses the facts, misrepresents the Church's side of the argument, sets up and demolishes strawmen, and delights the scientists in his audience while infuriating the churchmen. Galileo, according to everyone who can read him (unfortunately, I do not read Italian) was very funny, and Russell appears to be no worse than his illustrious predecessor. As you can see in my reading notes, there were numerous passages I immediately had to copy out for the benefit of my fellow Goodreaders.

A lot of the book, I felt, was basically entertainment. Towards the end, though, it started getting more serious, and I was reminded that Russell was a good philosopher and an excellent logician. In particular, I very much liked his brief and trenchant analysis of ethics. Science, argues Russell, cannot pronounce on ethics, but this is for the simple reason that statements in the realm of ethics are not within the purview of objective knowledge in the first place: they can always be paraphrased as expressions of personal desire or preference, and hence are purely subjective. This argument is probably well known to modern philosophers, but I had not seen it before and Russell puts the case nicely.

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Isil Arican says

Bertrand Russel, brilliant as always :)

So far he has been one of my favorite writers: kind, thoughtful, articulate and straightforward. This book was no exception.

"Why in any case, this glorification of man? How about lions and tigers? They destroy fewer animals or human lives than we do, and they are much more beautiful than we are. How about ants? They manage the Corporate State much better than any Fascist. Would not a world of nightingales and larks and deer be better than our human world of cruelty and injustice and war? The believers in Cosmic Purpose make much of our supposed intelligence, but their writings make one doubt it. If I were granted omnipotence, and millions of years to experiment in, I should not think Man much to boast of as the final result of all my efforts."

Alfaniel Aldavan says

Russell's clarity alone is a reason to read this book, any time.

The book is an easy read, articulate and entertaining. It's not a part of Russell's influential theories, rather an aside. Russell presents a history of refutations, from an analytical/scientific perspective, of arguments in favor of God's existence.

the world to the world. He quickly notices discrepancies and points them out. The elder is horrified by his young brother's disrespect and orders him to apologize and forgo any further comparisons. But the younger continues his comparisons and in short time proves most of his elder brother's claims about the world to be grotesque, deleterious superstitions. In the face of overwhelming evidence, the elder can do nothing but retreat from his prior claims and assert that their truthfulness is insignificant when compared to the "feeling" he has in believing them. The younger brother can make no real world comparison to his elder brother's "feeling," and thus the fraternal competition ends, the elder left grinning in self-righteous impotence while the younger busies himself with the salvation of mankind.

For Bertrand Russell the elder brother is religion and the younger science. His book about the two makes for a great read and a devastating critique of religion. For Russell, religious creeds are little more than residue of a former age's prejudices clung to by fearmongers and fools. Cloaking themselves in "goodness" and "righteousness," the followers of these creeds invariably enact the most depraved barbarities upon their fellow man, and never come close to conferring upon humanity the kinds of benefits science offers.

Russell's book has teeth. He sets forth his arguments with immaculate reasoning, plentiful examples, and centuries of history conveyed in lucid and witty prose. If you're like me, you'll be fascinated to learn, for example, that Darwin (the "apostle of dirt-worship," in Carlyle's words) was very much standing on the shoulders of geologists when he transgressed orthodoxy and declared evolution.

It was geologists of the 18th century who first proffered a theory of development in nature, speculating that mountains, seabeds, and coastlines actually change with time, and that the changes they've endured over millennia can be attributed to causes observable now. This was a revolutionary idea. Orthodoxy had hitherto claimed that the world and everything in it had, Venus-like, sprung to life in full form and, barring a few miracles, not changed since. Thus when French geologist Buffon claimed in 1749 that the hills one sees may not have always been there, the pathway to Darwin was sure as set.

The two most interesting chapters in Russell's book are those on Determinism and Cosmic Purpose. In the former Russell has the audacity (and wisdom) to disavow both determinism and free will. He does so by relegating both theories to the dustbin of "absolute metaphysical theories"—theories that go beyond what's provable in the real world. For Russell, claiming that our lives are completely determined or that they are freely willed is something akin to claiming life is just a dream—a point that can neither be proved nor disproved and is, in the end, moot.

Referring to the "modern doctrine of atomic caprice" (quantum physics), Russell maintains that even if a law were discovered that could determine with certainty the behavior of atoms, their subatomic parts, and everything composed of atoms and subatomic parts (in a word, everything) — something that still hasn't happened as of 2008, by the way — that discovery would add no consequence to the claim that our lives are determined. On the other hand, Russell urges us to reject "uncaused volitions" (truly "freely" willed choices) as impossible occurrences, and to avoid lamenting this fact or feeling any less potent because of it. Power, Russell rightly claims, "consists in being able to have intended effects," and that ability is neither increased nor diminished by discovering what causes our intentions.

Regarding the purpose of our cosmos, Russell rejects all doctrines that assert as much. To claim the cosmos has a purpose intended by God or by some creative or blind impulse in matter is to be guilty of logical fallacy. We sense order within us and we see it around us, and then we assume someone or something has intended that order. But we could just as well assume that no one intended it. And we could just as well assume that someone intended disorder, of which we'll find an equal amount within and around us if we so choose to look for it. What we choose to look for and assume, however, will always depend upon our values,

which stem from our desires. Science, as it were, has nothing to say about our values—it cannot tell us what is good or bad or right or wrong— and thus science has nothing to say about cosmic purpose.

Sir James Jeans, whom Russell quotes at length in his chapter on Cosmic Purpose, claims that life could just as well be regarded as “something of the nature of a disease, which infects matter in its old age when it has lost the high temperature and the capacity for generating high-frequency radiation with which younger and more vigorous matter would at once destroy life.” Another conception devoutly to be wished, perhaps.

For his part, Russell wonders if there isn't something in mankind that could be described in terms worse than Jeans' “disease.” Writing the book in 1935 at the height of the world's most dangerous new religious creeds, those of Hitler and Stalin, Russell muses about mankind's seemingly infinite capacity to inflict suffering upon the world. He ends the book warning of a new Dark Age that will descend on civilization if either of the murderous creeds succeeds and prevents scientists from doing their work. “New truth,” he writes, “is often uncomfortable, especially to the holders of power; nevertheless, amid the long record of cruelty and bigotry, it is the most important achievement of our intelligent but wayward species.”

My recommendation: read this book. It cannot lead our species any further wayward and will only make you more intelligent.

Reasonable says

Considering the book was written in the 30's, it is still relevant today. Russell deals with many fresh issues including dogmatism, ethics, evolution, scientific revolution and its implications for theology. The book is quite short and can be read easily. I'm not going to summarize all the chapters here. I'm just going to share my favourite quotes from the book, for your enjoyment, and my own.

Reason is a harmonising, controlling force rather than a creative one. Even in the most purely logical realms, it is insight that first arrives at what is new.

Education destroys the crudity of instinct, and increases through knowledge the wealth and variety of the individual's contacts with the outside world, making him no longer an isolated fighting unit, but a citizen of the universe, embracing distant countries, remote regions of space, and vast stretches of past and future within the circle of his interests. It is this simultaneous softening in the insistence of desire and enlargement of its scope that is the chief moral end of education.

The moon was found to have mountains, which for some reason was thought shocking. More dreadful still, the sun had spots! This was considered as tending to show that the Creator's work had blemishes; teachers in Catholic universities were therefore forbidden to mention sun-spots, and in some of them this prohibition endured for centuries.

