

**AN APPRAISAL OF BERTRAND RUSSELL'S NOTION OF RELIGION AS AN
ANTI-HUMAN DEVELOPMENT PHENOMENON**

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Abstract

One thinker, in his philosophy, that never hid his disgust for religion as an anti social, anti-human, anti development phenomenon is Bertrand Russell. Russell saw religion as anti-human development from moral and intellectual perspectives just as he is not convinced of the major arguments for God's existence. This paper critically examines Russell's negative views, weighing the different sides of his contentious arguments on the role of religion in development process within the human society. The method of the paper is expository and critical analysis. The work found out that even though religion is a strong instrument of meaning and of discipline yet its general overbearing influence, untamed can become a disservice to human development.

Introduction

No doubt religion has played significant roles in many human developmental efforts. For instance, Christianity has facilitated the spread of formal or western education, the cultural foundation of most European and Arab nations, contributed to the scientific discoveries and technological innovations; laid the foundations for sanctity of human life, equality of all men, men's liberty, abolition of slave trade, religious freedom, family and domestic stability. Uchenna M. Ugorie in his article; "The Role of Religion in Human Development", believes that religion has contributed a lot towards human development in these words:

It has been clearly seen that religion as an institution, has played enormous role in the sand of history, in the development of humanity and made more changes on earth for good than other institution. Religion laid the foundation of formal education, library system and university institutions. It contributed to scientific discoveries and technological innovations and advancements. In intellectual culture in general, It is worthy of note that religion fought against cannibalism, superstitious beliefs, the killing of twins, trial by ordeal, slavery and human sacrifice. It contributed so much to alienate human misery by building hospitals, rehabilitation units and workshops to take care of the sick, motherless babies, mentally ill-destitute, physically challenged lepers and empowered unskilled patients to learn trade during recovery. Professional medical nursing and Red Cross society trace their origin to religion. Religion laid the foundation for the sanctity of human life, the fundamental equality of all men, man's liberty, antislavery, land abolitionist attitude, religion freedom, domestic stability and favorable attitude to work.

Yet Bertrand Arthur William Russell made bold to say that religion is of negative effects to humanity in favour of scientific inclination that enhances human resource development. Russell believes that religious mentality, particularly the dogmatic, fearful, slavish and irrational tendencies, does a lot of harm to the scientific mentality needed for human development. Russell's objection can be seen in two ways: intellectual and moral. Intellectually, Russell believes that religion is inherently self contradictory, while morally, he believes religion is self defeating. For Russell to hold such a belief because it is useful and not because it is true seems a fundamental dishonesty and detrimental to intellectual integrity.

The problem of the paper is therefore this two edged sword nature of religion. While religion appears as a friend of human progress yet Russell accuses it otherwise. Russell's position is well captured in Yuval Noah Harare in his book *21 Lessons for 21st Century* which held that though religion may have helped in one way or the other in the past in terms of development, such as bringing of schools, hospitals and other civilization, yet, it has little or no relevance in the advancement of the contemporary techno scientific innovations in the current human society. Yuval rightly puts it: "Holy Scriptures may have been relevant in the Middle Ages, but how can they guide us in this period of artificial intelligence, bioengineering, global warming and cyber warfare".

Yuval Noah explains further that although religion in the pre-modern era played vital efforts in solving largely technical problems in the agricultural field, but with the advent of full-blown science, religion has outlived its usefulness. In the pre-scientific era, divine calendar determined the planting and harvesting seasons, while temple rituals secures rainfall and protects crops from pests attack. And when crisis invades agric fields as a result of drought or locusts attacks, farmers seek god's intervention through the priests as the last option and solution to the problem bracketing the medical intentions and applications too. This boosted religious economy as prophets, guru and shaman increasingly became the healing source. More so, Jesus Christ during his missionary trip on earth went about, healing the sick, made the blind to see, the dumb talk, and healed other diseases including madness, just as in the ancient Egypt and medieval Europe people solved their problems or its kind through the witch doctor rather than the medical doctor and, also made pilgrimages to the renowned temples rather than going to hospital. But all those approaches to problems and challenges have been overtaken by scientific exploits. Harare puts it thus:

In recent times the biologists and the surgeons have taken over from the priests and the miracle workers. If Egypt is now struck by a plague of locusts, Egyptians may well ask Allah for help - why not? - But they will not forget to call upon chemists, entomologists and geneticists to develop stronger pesticides and insect-resisting wheat strains. If the child of a devout Hindu Suffers from a severe case of measles, the father would say a prayer to Dhanvantari and offer flowers and sweets as a sacrifice at the local temple - but only after he has rushed the toddler to the nearest hospital and entrusted him to the care of the doctors there. Even mental illness the last bastion of religious healers is gradually passing into the hand of the scientists, as neurology replaces demonology and Prozac supplants exorcism. The victory of science has been so complete that our very idea of religion has changed. We no longer associate religion with farming and medicine.

The objective of the essay is to critically examine these positions on the role of religion in human development and that way answer the question: do we still need religion in the modern day's developmental efforts? The objective of the work shares the same spirit with Nida Kirmani's essay "Religion and Development: Conflict or Cooperation; Development and Faith: Where Mind and Soul Work Together" where he avers "although the work of many faith-based institutions is worth praising in terms of their contributions in promoting sustainable development and alleviating poverty, it is important for academics to view such efforts with a critical eye." This does not mean that religion can be viewed either wholly positively or wholly negatively. Rather, faith-based and secular development initiatives should both be analyzed carefully, critically, and contextually balanced in order to attain the development-related targets". Accordingly, Kirmani standing on the neutral ground about religion maintain that religion in its dogmas should be philosophically and critically evaluated before passing judgment either in support or against in the developmental process.

Perspectives on Russell's Value of Religion

Obviously, various scholars have interpreted and analyzed Russell's view of religion in different ways. Supporting the theory offered on religion by Russell, Alfred Hoernle in his article "The Religious Aspect of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy", in *Harvard Theological Review* appreciated Russell's idea of separating Christian religion from dogmas which attribute and subject man into fear and hitch. According to him, "in order to free religion from all dogmatic dependency, it is necessary to abstain from any demand that the world shall conform to certain subjective standard." The conceptual idea here is that Russell's attitude and mood stuck uniformly perfect against religious practices. In his free man's worship, since religion is rooted upon dogmas, we should rid ourselves of it and live freely without any fear of the unknown. This is because:

Life in the whole" is in the same breath, described also as a "habitual direction of our thoughts through which one actualizes whatever reason of life existence. Russell was of the opinion that religion should not be built on dogmas rather on free will and choice because according to him, it is in the nature of man to make the choice of the best for himself, and individuals should be in charge of their lives without fear and slavery of religion. Therefore, individuals should consciously work-out their values, take their responsibilities, independently make decisions and never live in compulsion, pretence and hidden lives rather, express freedom.

Furthermore, Hoernle shows that, for Russell, religion appears to be an essential part of man's whole philosophy and concern. So far as we ignore this side of his work, it seems to me that we are in danger, not only of losing an essential and valuable part of his philosophy, but also the benefitting factor it offers which taken in isolation, can only give a falsely one-sided direction to the philosophical interests of our generation. Hoernle holds in support of Russell that religion is for a man who is in such universe where freedom is free from fear and despair, still able to retain his faith in the dignity and worth of human life and human ideals, the concerns of Russell are placed on the destiny of human life on this earth. He states:

That man is the product of cause which has no prevision of the end they were achieving; that his origin, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and his beliefs, are but that outcome of accidental collections of atoms; that no fire, no heroism, no intensity of thought and feeling, can

preserve an individual life beyond that grave, that all the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins all these things, if not quite beyond dispute, are yet so nearly certain, that no philosophy which rejects them can hope to stand. Only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation or unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

Hoernle affirms that Russell deeply and consciously stressed on man's freedom from the fear and agony of religion, liberate himself from the guardianship of religion that holds him captive and be liberated for his personal goals. Accordingly, the best and only way one can do is to confront the world as Job in the depth of his affliction confronted him: "I know that he will slay me; I have no hope; nevertheless will I maintain my integrity before him". For Russell, the deep and tragic conflict in the modern mind, such as austere harmony as it may be called, where anguish and despair are so strangely mingled with defiance and excitement is an existential crisis. It was the reason why Russell refuses the mystic's vision. He holds the object of that vision to be a mere product of man's imagination which is not vision as supposed. Thus, man creates God all powerful and all good, the mystic unity of what is and what should be. Again and again he reminds us that God is but the creature of the conscience, one's own love of the good.

In supportive view, Timothy Smith in his work: "My Philosophical Development" holds that Russell's "general movement have not been without direction; from idealism to realism, from monism to pluralism, from transcendentalism to naturalism, from mysticism to atomism". Illustratively, Russell was motivated to move into different schools of thought due to the dynamic and complexity of human nature. According to Smith, Russell in his love for wisdom has never stationed in one school because he sought for clear and distinct ideas of philosophical development. Nevertheless, Russell remains focused despite his inconsistency. He deploys himself side-ways when he cannot go straight forward and hardly repeat himself if he tried; notably he states thus:

In his teens Russell had already discarded for reasons he wrote down, the chief verities of Christian belief: God, freedom, and immortality. Already he had addicted himself to mathematics no more out of a love for abstractions than in hope that he could enlarge the already shrunken boundaries of what could be truly known.

Obviously, Russell's expression of why he said "I am not a Christian" implies that he did not believe in God, the immortality of the soul and, because religion is a disease born of fear, a source of untold misery to humanity, and as well a deprivation of human freedom. According to Charles Hartshorne in "Mental Development of Russell", Russell makes it clear for better understanding of his basic motives and values. His grandmother, by whom he was largely brought up, had the protestant belief in private judgment and the supremacy of the individual conscience and nurtured him on such thought as; "thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil, be strong, and of a good courage.... For the Lord thy God is with thee

wheresoever's thou goes".

In *The Critic of Knowledge* Chrysantus Ogbozo, supports Russell's application of mathematical approach to human knowledge in search of reality. Accordingly, Russell uncertain of the nature of religion and its practices tried to correct such using mathematical formulas. Notably Russell said; "I wanted certainty in the kind of ways in which people want religious faith".

Consequently, Bright Man despite his support, criticizes Russell of his inconsistency towards religion. In his work, *Essay on Philosophy of Religion and other Related Essays*, Man notes that Russell admits that his attitude to religion is 'somewhat complex and his acceptance of the context rendered his theory on religion uncertain. Russell considers some form of personal religion highly desirable and feel that many people are unsatisfactory through lack of it. Evidently he states thus:

I do not believe that I should have been as kind to someone who had attacked my beliefs in the manner in which I have attacked beliefs which he holds. I will try to follow his example, and to deal with the questions involved as inoffensively as I am able. And firstly, I will re-state in outline my general attitude towards religion, which is somewhat complex.

Nevertheless, Russell's theory and notion on Religion attracts criticisms from many theologians and other scholars. Russell's work, *Why I am not a Christian* was attacked seriously by certain religious defenders. This is because his anti-religious acts mostly took occurrence within the era of religious revival, that is, the period when much interest of many intellectuals were centered on Catholicism. Notably, the responses were so aggressive. To that effect, scholars like, Thomas Stearn Eliot, Herbert George Wood and Kenneth Ingram and among others are the most devoted critics on Russell's notion against religion.

Thomas Stearns Eliot in "Religion and Beliefs", in the same vein criticizes Russell's attack on religion and maintains that all the arguments that he put forward are known to him at the age of five. He suggested pointedly that Russell should stick strictly to mathematics. Kenneth Ingram in "The Unreasonableness of Anti-Christianity: A Reply to Why I am not a Christian" published on behalf of the Catholic Literature Association of the Anglo-Catholic Congress Committee by the Society of SS Peter and Paul in London. Ingram however, even though not a Catholic offers a sound and balanced criticism against Russell. Herbert Wood also in "Why Bertrand Russell Is Not a Christian: an Essay in Controversy" tries to trace Russell's anti religious sentiments as not just from scholarship but a sensibility he took from family upbringing. Russell equally responded in a paper "Why Mr. Wood Is Not a Freethinker."

Sam Harris in his book, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion* argues that human and material development is as a result of mindset not religion since most religions make claims about reality that are mutually incompatible. Harris advocating for mindfulness, defined it as a clear awareness of one's situation which can be gained through meditation and the purpose of meditation is the consciousness of the mind.

That is, it is the recognition of the already made mind. That discovery, in turn, helps man to avoid doing the things or actions that produces harmful state, confusion and suffering for himself and others who are yet to develop. Severing religion from development Harris submits:

At its best, religion is a set of stories that recount the ethical and contemplative insights of our wisest ancestors. But these stories

come to us bundled with ancient confusion and perennial lies. And they invariably harden into doctrines that defy revision generation after generation. The great pressure of accumulating knowledge in science, medicine, history has begun to scour our culture of many of these ideas. With the force of a glacier, perhaps, but at a similar pace. The exponential increase in the power of technology brings with it a commensurate increase in the consequences of human ignorance.

In a nutshell, Harris maintains that, for development and creativity to emerge for a flourishing life of certainty, religion should be discarded in order not to terrify our children with thoughts of hell or poison them with hatred for infidels. We should not teach our sons to consider women their future property or convince our daughters that they are property even now. And we must decline to tell our children that human history began with bloody magic and will end with bloody magic in a glorious war between the righteous and the rest".

Jeffrey Haynes in his article; "Religion and Development: Ways of Transforming the World" attempts to consider the role of religion as a facilitating factor in the development process in its potentially constructive and destructive roles. According to him, "faithbased organizations have the potential in harmonizing the human society especially in terms of conflicts prevention, peace and conflicts resolutions, wealth creation, leadership, environmental and health management, hospitality and education that enhances economic development". From these angles Jeffrey holds that, religion is a vital benefiting factor in developmental importance in the developing world in these words:

Over time, developments associated with modernization. that is, socio economic and political change, urbanization, industrialization, government centralization and globalization, that is, increased, persistent, multidimensional, transnational popular interaction are crucial to understanding increased attention on faith in development within the developing world. What is abundantly clear however, is that 'religion', or faith' has not faded its importance to both human and societal development as against the modern theory. Instead religion has major- maybe growing - developmental importance in the developing world. It is also widely recognized that the nature and characteristics of FIAs are not only linked to structural and systemic attributes but also reflect particular features of faith associated cultures.

Haynes however, did not fail to note the detrimental impact of religion mostly in the conflict situations. He held it that religious groups and ideologies can often play potentially harmful role in heightening divisions between groups, justifying oppressive practices, and promoting violent conflict." The Islamists' Insurgency and other religious vices in Nigeria are evidences of this.

Paul Ricoeur in "Critique and Conviction" supported the idea of "external critique of religion" propounded by the modern masters of suspicion- Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. This group ignoring the argument on God's existence, held it that the criticisms against religion is an

attempt to remove the mystery of religious language by exposing its underlying falsehood, and decoding its apparent message coded in language of domination and submission. Obviously, they maintained that philosophy is the better option that can facilitate the faithful to overcome religion and embrace science as a new horizon of human possibility beyond religious affirmations.

For Evander Bradley, Bertrand Russell's *Philosophical Essays on Mathematics*, stood on Russell's regards on mathematical conceptions as of prime value. Evidently he states:

For the health of the moral life, for ennobling the tone of an age or a nation, the austere virtues have a strange power, exceeding the power of those not informed and purified by thought. Of these austere virtues the love of truth may find encouragement for wanting faith. Every great study is not only an end in itself, but also a means of creating and sustaining a lofty habit of mind; and this purpose should be kept always in view throughout the teaching and learning of mathematics.

As Russell rightly viewed it possesses not truth, but supreme beauty. The true spirit of delight, the exaltation, the sense of being more than man which is the touchstone of the highest excellence is to be found in mathematics as surely found in poetry. For him, real life is to most men, a long second-best, a perpetual compromise between the ideal and the possible; but the world of pure reason knows no compromise, no practical limitations, no barrier to creativity embodying in splendid edifices the passionate aspiration after the perfect from which all great works springs.

Daniel Sommer Robinson in review of *Why I am not a Christian and other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, pointed out Russell's un-balanced style of writing and as well the different behavioral attitudes of some Christians especially the protestant and the Catholic freethinker's towards tolerance. According to him, Russell writes at times with cultivation and at times with passion, but not always with both at the same time. However, Russell being an extremely cultivated writer often prefers to exercise indifferent and somewhat incompatible virtue: "moral fervor". Meanwhile, Russell must have to be appreciated for pointing out the incompatibility of these two virtues and for exemplifying it in his own sensibility. One of the most suggestive insights in *Why I am not a Christian* is the distinction made by Russell between Protestant freethinkers and Catholic freethinkers. Accordingly, he states:

The Protestant skeptic takes his skepticism over seriously. He is fanatically in favor of tolerance, a chaste defender of sensual pleasure, a scrupulous advocate of moral laxity. The Catholic skeptic, on the other hand is amiable and light in his criticism of tradition; his opposition to the church and social authority is moderated by nostalgia; (familiar surroundings), his chief virtue is a delicate tolerance accompanied by its correlative fault, lack of integrity: It simply put that Protestants like to be good and have invented theology in order to keep themselves so, whereas Catholics like to be bad and have invented theology in order to keep others good. The Catholic freethinker tends to eschew solemnity both moral and intellectual, whereas the Protestant freethinker is very prone to both.

Applying these ideal categories, Russell plays a dualistic stand as both a Protestant and a Catholic atheist, exemplifying the very virtues and failings which he sees in both types. But his

intellectual ability and playfulness with occasional deceptive and irresponsibility as when he equates religious conviction with prejudice and social reaction, moral principles with parochial customs help to classify his temperament as Catholic, but his naive concern with the logical validity of theological arguments stamp him as a Protestant.

Conclusion

Thomas Hobbes and Jeremy Bentham directly and indirectly agree with Russell in his antagonistic view of religion. In review of Russell's work titled; *A Free Man's Worship*, they made almost equal claims to Russell's cultural ancestry. In other words, there is the need to elaborate and explain further the inconsistency of the great logician insisting in one essay which holds that the influence of religion has been an unmitigated evil, and noting in another essay, how freethinkers owe their most interesting qualities to their religious environment. In their appraisal, Russell is only natural in a richly humanistic spirit that spans two centuries of radical change. Russell's various criticisms of religion in his "A Free Man's Worship, Essays on Religion, and among other works remain firm and bears his attacks on his personal notion of religion. However, in *What I Believe* according to Russell, the essence of religion or the emphasis should lie on worship, acquiescence, love - in short, on union with the universe in thought, in feeling, in will. "Union in thought is knowledge, union in feeling is love, and union in will is service" Therefore, 'true union' has been the improvement of the materials of philosophical speculation by the sacrifice of the fullness of life. Once religion abandons its role as a keeper of conscience and as an instrument of meaning, to the service material progress, it quickly ushers in a huge disappointment

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