

Religion and Science

B. Russell

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Russell is never boring to read. Even when he is more frivolous than serious. He often wrote in order to earn his bread, this necessitated turning to a wide audience and keeping the discussion on an accessible level. A good exercise in many ways, turning an argument simple, shorn of technical jargon. This is vintage Russell as a popularizer.

One of his main missions as a popularizer was to persuade the common reader of a secular perspective. The times (early 20th century) were rather appropriate. The major inroads into the authority of the church had already been made, still an anti-religious stand was still considered somewhat *avant-garde* and hence still titillating¹. In the book he makes the standard arguments against religion, the most important being the gradual erosion of church authority during the scientific revolution. The Bible traditionally was seen as the ultimate authority, as such it had to be swallowed whole if at all. Much can be said for such a fundamental view from a rational point of view, Russell admits, once certain parts of the Bible were discounted, on what authority should the rest rest? The church fathers knew that giving in would have momentous consequences, in fact, as Russell points out, they were generally far more adept at assessing the consequences of scientific claims than the scientists themselves, who generally tended to be rather pious when it came to religious matters. (Maybe because they did not give much thought beyond conventional pieties).

The first great challenge to church authority was the Copernican point of view. The ecclesiastics had no problems with the heliocentric view being presented as a mathematical model to facilitate computations, only so far when it came to an open defiance of the word of God. They did not pull any punches, Bruno was burned at the stake, and Galileo, with this in fresh memory, threatened with the horrors available to the Inquisition. One should not believe that the Protestants were necessarily more tolerant than the Catholics, it was just that their worldly power was less pronounced. Then for a few hundred years celestial mechanics had its unprecedented triumph, and when the next challenge to the Bible was presented, namely that of Darwin, then the church was rather enfeebled as a result of the ensuing dawn of the Enlightenment, although in a sense the stakes were much higher, and Darwin presented a far more serious threat to Biblical authority, aiming at its very centre, than the heliocentric view had ever presented. Also in the interim the church had consistently been on the side of superstition and intolerance, as illustrated by the witch-hunts² and barbarous medical practices, further eroding its authority with common

¹ Russell was famously debarred from a position at City University for his openly atheistic views and supposedly explicit championship of sexual freedom.

² Witch-hunts, Russell noted, died out early in the 18th century. The claims on which it had been based were actually never refuted, there simply by that time no longer were any interest in examining them.

people. The upshot was that by the 20th century the church had retreated leaving only its core intact, and conceding to science the world of fact, no longer upholding the fiction that the factual stories of the Bible (which incidentally to a large extent contradicted each other) should be taken literally and instead only claiming that they should be interpreted allegorically. In a sense the war between science and religion seemed to have come to a truce, each demarcating a territory on which each had authority and with few disputed areas in between.

So what was left? Spirituality? A very abstract conception of God as the ulterior force in the universe, if no longer the law-giver at least the one which imbued the cosmos with meaning. Also the assertion that life, or at least mind, could not be explained materialistically, but that there needed something extra. That life was as much above matter, as mind was above life. And if so God was to mind, as mind to life (or matter?). But as Russell wryly asks, why stop at the fourth level, why not go the whole infinity? In many ways, modern crusaders against religious thought, such as Dawkins, hold such wishy-washiness in greater contempt than they do the fundamentalists, whose ardor they can at least respect. You have to take sides, the most insidious position is the one trying to straddle the middle-ground. As Christ once said, neither hot nor cold, luke-warm I spit you out. Russell has some scorn for people like Haldane, who with such impeccable scientific credentials nevertheless loses their faith at the final test and mouth sentimental pieties. But as Russell has remarked, scientists are often more sentimental and muddle-headed than their clerical foes. In fact a scientist waxing too earnestly on metaphysical matters runs the risk of appearing a mystic. The theologians have e.g. traditionally warned against pantheism, as it involved sullyng the deity with the reality of sin.

Now the 20's did effect a revolution in physics, which Russell of course is forced to take notice of. One spectacular feature of it was how effectively it undermined the traditional view of matter as being solid and predictable. Modern quantum theory has an uncanny, not to say disturbing effect, as to the distinction between materialism and idealism, at least to those philosophically minded³. Thus Russell gets engaged in a rather confusing, if not necessarily confused, discussion in which he argues both against determinism and free-will. The point of course being that neither has any bearing on the matter at hand. This of course leads to the final issue, namely that on ethics. Russell's position is clear, but sharp enough still to shock latter day commentators, such as Michael Ruse writing the forward of the present edition. Ethics is not the domain of science, he simply claims, it has to do less with fact and truth than desire. On desire science can say nothing, one desire as good as any other from the point of view of factual truth. It is like a case of liking oysters or not. Ruse is a bit taken a back by this post-modernist relativity position of Russell, forgetting, or maybe not even understanding that Russell does not claim that he desires say Gandhi no more than Hitler, only that his desire cannot be rationalized, it has to stand on its own.

Now one can claim that desire is a biological determined thing, and thus ultimately explained by physics. On the other hand desire as desire is something that stands alone,

³ Dirac supposedly scoffed at philosophical speculations as to the nature of quantum theory, as just being misdirected efforts to use an inappropriate language in which to describe and explain the sub-atomic phenomena

humans act through desire, they cannot otherwise. To try and change your desire only means that you have a desire to do so. Thus, to acknowledge desire does not mean to adhere to a spiritual position. Russell is right, I claim, but his being right is not such a momentous thing that Ruse seems to believe.

So what is the final position? That our existence is meaningless from a cosmic perspective? Yes of course, but that does not matter. What matters is here and now, and as humans we can only follow our desires, those alone in a sense give our lives meaning, And Russell ends on a rather conciliatory note. By retreating from the unsustainable positions, Christianity has purified itself and become an ethical exemplar, teaching the basic virtues (as desired by Russell?) of tolerance and charity. The Fundamentalist rights did apparently not play anything but a curious role in 1935, instead the religions that Russell is warning against are the secular ones in Russia and Germany.

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