

Why I Am Not a Christian — an Epilogue to Bertrand Russell

At 4.30, one morning, the ping of an incoming message woke me up. As it turned out, it was a message from a friend exhorting me to turn away from my evil ways and accept Jesus Christ. I tried to put it away and go back to sleep, but couldn't. I believe it is time now to put on paper the thoughts that have been floating around in my head since my late teens.

When I was a teenager, I happened upon Bertrand Russell's essay, 'Why I Am Not a Christian'. When my parents saw me reading it, they took it away from me, saying such books make one question one's faith. But, by then, I had read the essay and the damage had been done. The question, 'Why am I — or, aren't I — a Christian?' has popped up in my mind regularly, again and again, since then. Growing up in a Christian household in India, where faith is a big deal, and where the total number of Christians is less than 10%, gives you a unique vantage point as regards your faith. Most people really have not met with a convincing, challenging alternative to their faith, except for the rationalistic view, which really does not pose a significant challenge; hence the slow erosion of faith and its role in life. However, I never had that luxury: so, the time has come to make my peace and write my piece. My mother always told me never to voice anything that may make people question their 'simple faith'. I now know that is wrong. I am sure there are many who have the same questions as I do but are afraid to voice their doubts. I write this to let them know they are not alone and that it is perfectly fine to have doubts.

What Is Christianity?

In his 1927 (Russell, 1982) essay, Bertrand Russell first describes the kind of Christianity he is talking about. He goes on to say that the reader's faith may NOT be the one he is describing: if so, he has no problems with that. In fact, I did not believe in those things either, and felt that the essay should have been titled 'What Christianity Is Not'. In the same way, the Christianity I speak about may sound different from your personal faith: in that case, this essay is not about your faith, or whatever you call it, but you may still find these issues interesting food for thought.

The Chosen People

In the *Bible*, the *Book of Exodus* is all about a group of people who have come to be known as 'God's chosen people'. God calls them out of Egypt and gives them dominion over the Chosen Land, driving out or destroying everyone who lived there before that. In the first book, *Genesis*, the *Bible* speaks about how God created the world, and then made Man in His own image and gave him dominion over the entire creation (Genesis 1:28). In later years, too, Christians have arrived at distant shores and claimed them to be the Promised Land, driving out or exterminating the local people. The idea or belief that the earth is created for man to enjoy would eventually lead to the destruction of our fragile ecosystem.

Christians believe that when they die, they and they alone will enter heaven (John 3:17-18): hence the idea of the 'heathen' as a second-class citizen. This later gets developed into an idea of 'progress' where they see all civilization as moving towards 'modern' culture. All other faiths and world views are seen as misguided, at best. God loves HIS PEOPLE (John 3:16).

The Sacred and the Profane

Christians make a clear differentiation between what is sacred and what is profane, and what is good and what is bad. To be fair, practically everyone has a reasonable understanding of what is good and what is bad. But the constant war between good and evil comes from the notion of God and the Devil. This leads to the notion that one must reject 'the ways of the world', even if, or rather, especially if, it appears pleasurable. Temptation lurks at every turn. Satan has laid his traps and so, be ever on guard. Hence, everything OF THIS WORLD, unless notified otherwise, is wrong and to be rejected.

Yet, at the heart of Christianity lies a cannibalistic ritual. The Eucharistic Mass or the Holy Communion consists of drinking the blood and eating the flesh of Jesus. There are those who would argue that this is merely a symbolic ritual, but cannibalism has always been ritual. It has been the belief that eating the organs of a dead enemy warrior would enable the imbibing of the qualities of the warrior, often, bravery and strength. The doctrine of transubstantiation holds that the wine and bread 'mysteriously' get transformed into the actual blood and body of Christ. The allusion of the Eucharist to cannibalism is undeniable. If this was not profane enough, the Christian faith is replete with questionable deeds such as 'being washed in the blood of the lamb', a reference to the Passover and the Jewish tradition of smearing the blood of a lamb over one's door to protect one's family from the last of the ten plagues.

Historicity, the Struggle for Power

What if, in reality, Jesus never existed? In my childhood, I was never allowed to question the historicity of the *Bible*. "Some questions should never be asked," they would say. But are sacred texts historical records kept of actual events? While historians accept that historical narratives are closely tied to the identity of tribes and groups, in many cultures they exist as myths and legends that cannot be verified. The cultural function of myths is not to tell us what happened in the past, but to provide us with instructions on how to live today. Even if myths may have their roots in some vaguely similar historical events, they are interpreted by the storyteller to help us understand the present. The struggle to prove historicity is a struggle for power, and it can be translated thus: If my myth describes events that actually happened, then my myths must be right and yours are wrong. The attempt is to say that the Christian way is not just another way to live life and find the meaning of life, it is THE ONLY WAY.

A corollary of this states that the existence of God is a scientific fact, which seems strange when you consider that God has none of the characteristics of a physical object. Part of the reason for the insistence of the same is the rising materialism in the modern world. Materialism says that if God does not have a corporeal body, He is IMMATERIAL (pun intended). This leads to all sorts of ridiculous experiments that aim to prove the existence of the soul or of God. Yet, even in the 21st century, we have not found 'physical evidence' for the existence of the soul or of God, undermining the faith of many.

Ethics

The interesting part of Christian ethics is the obsession over the natural order, put in place by God. It seems to be quite difficult to understand God's concern with sexual activity practised

between consenting adults in private. In India, there is a similar obsession about diet. I personally don't feel attracted to a plateful of snails for lunch, but to me it seems like an issue of preference. Similarly, my sexual orientation is a matter of personal preference, so why would it matter to God?

Guilt and Fear

To me, it seems that most of the Christian faith is built on two emotions, fear and guilt: fear of what comes after death, fear of a wrathful God and His punishment, fear of being ostracized, all play an important role in shaping Christian piety and practices. In a similar way, it is WRONG to do things merely for pleasure. God does not like His people enjoying themselves other than in His teaching. Quite clearly, enjoying the world would draw people away from God. Hence, many Christians live in a state of constant guilt. After all, Jesus died to save you from the consequences of living a worldly life. He himself committed no sin but saved the entire world through his death — something no one understands, but understanding is not required, only faith is.

Questions, questions, questions ... where are the answers?

This article so far outlined the doubts and questions I have had; this piece would be incomplete if I did not mention the answers I found. However, these are *my* answers. I am sure there are many who have found answers much deeper and more meaningful than mine. I offer my answers as a mere starting point for your own search for answers. I also do not claim that my spiritual journey is complete. This is but a snapshot taken with a high-speed camera, freezing the action at that moment. I may change.

1. My God is the god of all creation, not just of Christians; hence, He does not have a special preference for Christians.
2. I am not really that interested in gaining material favours or even eternal life — these seem quite selfish to me. I am more interested in how I can go beyond my selfishness.
3. Guilt and fear are among the lower emotions that I would like to conquer, not feed. I want to practice a faith that gives me strength, one based on courage, love and hope.
4. Materialism, whether it be history or science, has only a peripheral significance to faith and spirituality. Seeing larger patterns and discovering meaning are more important than that. Perhaps we should, as Wilhelm Dilthey suggested, explore the possibility of a Human Science that is different from Natural Science which deals with things. Unlike what many believe, science is not a religion, not an explanation of how things work. It is limited to a study of physical objects and physical laws. It has a set of assumptions and rules that one has to obey, much like a game, only, there is no bat or ball, and it is a word (language) game.
5. Maybe, the creator and the creation are not different things but the same? Maybe, the creation is not so much as something an artisan created and blew life into but, rather, an unfolding from within?
6. If the above is true, then I seek the creator in the creation and I believe that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is in my mind, a result of my own lack of understanding. When I am able to overcome my limitations, I believe I will see EVERYTHING as sacred and find GOD everywhere I look.

But this raises a question. How does one explain the unfairness in the world? Why do bad things happen to good people? My answer is, I don't know. There are many things I do not know in the world. It would be surprising if it was otherwise. For a thought experiment, imagine Knowledge is Light and Not-Knowing is Darkness. Obviously, darkness is absence of light like ignorance is absence of knowledge. Whichever side the light shines from, a shadow falls on the opposite side of the object. Hence, we see shadows everywhere. Indeed, if there were no shadows, or even shades of grey, visual perception would be very difficult. There is only one position that does not have a shadow, and that is when the light shines directly from above. As long as one lives in this world, in this body, one will always see things from one side or the other, and there will be shadow on the other side. Perhaps, one day, I will see a world without shadows and have complete answers; until then, I live in a world of shadows, and I learn as much, perhaps more, from shadows as I do from light. In fact, I search out shadows I can learn from.

So, I confess I do not know why the world is unfair or why bad things happen to good people. I do not have to know all the answers. But I am firm in the faith that the world is a good place to be in and that God created the world as a good and beautiful place where we can learn the lessons of life.

7. I believe in a God of Love, one who is forgiving and one who wants me to explore and enjoy life, without being afraid.

8. Yes, I believe in God. But I am not sure that He made me in His image. For, if God is like me, it would be hard to believe in Him. Or, perhaps, I do not know myself enough, and when I do, I will discover I am like God. Or, if the creator and the creation are the same, then I might discover I AM God.

9. The ethics of God is LOVE. All that I need to know is how to love. Yes, love is primarily an approach, a mental state; it may lead to action, but love is primary. And, as each day goes by, I try to INCREASE the love in my life. Love is a gift: it can never be earned. Love is something you get from God / the world / nature primarily and you GIVE. Most people are more interested in getting love than giving it. Ethics should challenge us to go beyond our fear and self-interest, but be forgiving if we cannot achieve lofty ideals.

10. I do not know what happens after death. I have several hypotheses, but I can only know after I die. I would rather be honest about it than say something else because I am afraid.

\section*{Statutory Disclaimer}

This document is meant to be a statement at a particular date and in the context of my life at the time. I am completely okay with the idea that at a different time and in a different context, my answers may be quite different. If you would like an update about a specific part or have a question, please email me the question. If you do not specifically refuse it, I may include your question and my answer in a later update of the document.