

RUSSELL'S RETICENCE WITH RELIGION

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My views on religion remain those which I acquired at the age of sixteen. I consider all forms of religion not only false but harmful. My published works record my views.¹

These words are indicative of Russell's chagrin at being thought to be on the side of religion. Yet, although they come from Russell himself, they nevertheless do not do justice to his religious views. Russell's irreligion was not areligious, nor was it monolithic. Neither of these characteristics can be gathered from the above statement, however, or from the majority of his polemic against religion.

The brief words quoted above were written when Russell was 95 to combat the recurring rumour that he had become reconciled to religion. Though the rumour of a reconciliation was false, as such rumours about Russell always had been, I will not concentrate on the rumours. Instead I will focus on how Russell contributed to the perception of his religious views as entirely negative, a perception that apparently bothered him very little. Unlike the quoted response above, Russell was not eager to contest the interpretation that he was opposed to religion on all counts. In fact, as in the above response, he shows a willingness to allow such a misconception. When his views on religion were at issue Russell's responses reveal conspicuously little of the complexity of a viewpoint that was not monolithically negative, nor do his responses in any substantial way indicate the protracted nature of his own struggle for a personal religion.

In reviewing Russell's very popular *A History of Western Philosophy*, the noted historian of ideas John Hermann Randall, Jr., noted that on

¹ "Bertrand Russell on the Afterlife", *The Humanist*, 28, no. 5 (Sept.–Oct. 1968): 29.

thinkers whom Russell found uncongenial, he was “no safe guide”.²

If Randall’s criticism is a fair judgment of Russell on this point, there is a temptation to speculate whether a similar appraisal could be made of Russell’s treatment of subjects that he found uncongenial. Religion would be a likely candidate, given Russell’s views on a subject that roused some of his most passionate, though primarily negative, feelings. However, the question addressed here is not whether Russell is an unsafe guide on the subject of religion, but rather why Russell is not a reliable guide on himself when the subject is religion. To take that brief statement from Russell with which we began, Russell’s published works do not reveal a view that considers “all forms of religion not only false but harmful”. To the question of how Russell contributed to that impression is coupled the larger question of why he did not seek to mollify that impression. These are the questions raised in this essay.

I

The complexity of Russell’s religious views is succinctly articulated by Russell himself in a single sentence of response to the personalist philosopher Edgar Brightman, who noted in 1944 that Russell’s view of religion was not entirely negative. Russell’s response was that

What makes my religious views complex is that although I consider some form of personal religion highly desirable, and feel many people unsatisfactory through 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.³

In this passage Russell finds organized religion, on balance, as having put more harm than good into the world, but he finds people unsatisfactory who nonetheless lack some form of personal religion. In this passage, too, we are introduced to another negative judgment on religion: its untruth as set out in theology, but a view nonetheless affixed to a positive judgment that there is a form of personal religion that is neither untrue nor harmful. The distinctions made here by Russell must be kept

² *The New York Times Book Review*, 21 Oct. 1945, p. 32.

³ “Reply to Criticisms”, in Schilpp, p. 726; *Papers II*: 52.

in mind in order to understand the specifics of his position on religion—and also to understand his own religious journey.

The distinction between what is desirable about religion and what is undesirable—that is, personal religion bereft of theological metaphysics and organization, and the attendant harms and untruths, and bad religion embracing all of them—requires paying scrupulous attention to the context of any denunciation of religion by Russell. Though one hardly receives the impression from Russell that his sympathy for a personal religion is sympathy for more than a form of personal religion,⁴ one can erroneously infer that a denunciation of religious metaphysics or organized religious bodies is a criticism of all religion, and that religion, *in toto*, is of no value. Indeed, Russell’s condemnations of religion typically pass over his desire to retain and, as in his response to Brightman, to commend a form of personal religion. However often in his negative polemic Russell did not observe his own distinctions, they are nonetheless distinctions that undergird his position on religion.

The distinctions become apparent in trying to put together all that Russell had to say on religion, and to make sense of a plethora of statements in his writings which seem initially to cancel each other. I shall consider, for example, two often-quoted statements from Russell’s multi-volume *Autobiography*:

Throughout the long period of religious doubt, I had been rendered very unhappy by the gradual loss of belief, but when the process was completed, I found to my surprise that I was quite glad to be done with the whole thing.

(*Auto.* I: 41)

The sea, the stars, the night wind in waste places, mean more to me than even the human beings I love best, and I am conscious that human affection is to me at bottom an attempt to escape from the vain search for God. (*Auto.* 2: 38)

Here the origins of religion in a negative context are attributed to an

⁴ This, however, could happen on occasion. Russell relates the following story in the *Autobiography*. “I got into trouble with a passage at the tail end of my last Columbia lecture. In this passage, I said that what the world needs is ‘love, Christian love, or compassion.’ The result of my use of the word ‘Christian’ was a deluge of letters from free-thinkers deploring my adoption of orthodoxy, and from Christians welcoming me to the fold” (*Auto.* 3: 30; New York ed.: Simon and Schuster, 1969, p. 24).

unfounded fear of unhappiness, but the quest in the second quotation suffers no such association regarding its origins. Unlike the early adolescent quest in which Russell in retrospect confessed that "loneliness had much more to do with my unhappiness than theological difficulties",⁵ we can infer from the second quotation that the quest for religion is not, for Russell, always something that one should desire to be rid of.⁶

These statements in the same work highlight the fact that though the adolescent religious quest referred to in the first quotation sloughed off various components of traditional theism, the settlement with theology was not the death of religion for him. The second statement, however, though indicative of the fact that the desire for some form of religion did survive, nonetheless does not reverse or compromise the earlier theological critique of religion: Russell's earlier judgments on the theological tenets of the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the freedom of the will are not rescinded.⁷ But there remained a search for a form of personal religion that continued, though it was over the rubble of a rejected religious metaphysic and despite the absence of the traditional components of creed and church. The consequences of Russell's critique of theology, however, would turn his search for a personal religion from theology to philosophy.

Russell's desire for a form of personal religion would prove as tenacious as the desire to penetrate the core of mathematical certainty—and as disappointing. His ultimate desire was to ground his religious feeling in something that his intellect could embrace. This would require the aid of philosophy, for theology had been given up in the earlier religious quest. Russell would now subject his philosophy to the same scrutiny that he had earlier subjected theological doctrines. But Hegelianism and Pythagorean number mysticism would fail after Moore and Wittgenstein, respectively, with Russell writing in the aftermath that he had "never since found religious satisfaction in any philosophical doctrine that I could accept."⁸ Two decades after the adolescent quest was over

⁵ "My Religious Reminiscences", in *BW*, p. 31.

⁶ See, for example, the letter to G. Lowes Dickinson quoted in sec. III.

⁷ These were the theological tenets Russell subjected to intense criticism at the time of his adolescent religious crisis. A reference to that crisis is also contained in the first sentence of the quotation from Russell with which this essay began.

⁸ "Why I Took to Philosophy", in *PFM*, p. 18.

Russell would write: "Yet when the dogmas have been rejected, the place of religion in life is by no means decided."⁹ The routing of theological tenets in his adolescent quest and the failure of any philosophical doctrine to serve a religious purpose would compound the problem of establishing a personal religion for himself.

II

Russell's religious thought becomes clearer if we address what he saw himself doing when he spoke on the subject of religion. Answering this question makes more intelligible any apparent unconcern on his part for a more holistic perception of his religious views.

Russell's negative criticisms of religion are due to his notion of the gigantic failings of religion. These failures have already been mentioned as the lack of truth in religion and the harm it provokes. Russell was willing to criticize religion so severely precisely because he saw much of religion as not encouraging persons to "stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world—its good facts, its bad facts, its beauties, and its ugliness, see the world as it is and be not afraid of it" (*WINC*₂, p. 23). The resulting false beliefs were coupled with another culprit emanating from religion: the great harms that resulted from false beliefs. This dual criticism of religion by Russell is the source of his negative critique of religion, and it occupies so much of his writings on religion because, on his view, religion had scorched the world with both falsities and cruelties.

Russell's identification of religion as one of the major culprits responsible for much unnecessary cruelty in the world made him ferociously averse to the harm that religion produced. Though the power of religion has subsided over the last centuries Russell claimed that, if unchecked, religion and its authorities would resume their cruel quest for power unabated.¹⁰ However his relentless and public quest against harm and

⁹ "The Essence of Religion", in *BW*, p. 565; *Papers* 12: 112.

¹⁰ "Among liberal-minded laymen, one meets, not infrequently, the view that the Church has ceased to be a weighty factor in the life of the community. This is, to my mind, a profound error. The law of marriage and divorce, though not quite what most ecclesiastics would wish, retains absurdities and cruelties—such as the refusal of divorce for insanity—which would not survive a week but for the influence of Christian

cruelty could mask his underlying motivation in such an endeavour. Readers of Russell on the harmfulness of religion may suspect him in the same way that one reviewer of Russell's *Unpopular Essays* did: as a man to whom "nothing is holy". This assessment could hardly reveal a greater misunderstanding. Russell is so irreverent because he does regard some things as in some sense sacred, and his commentary on the failures of religion is due to his desire to remove the religious obstacles that he saw as impediments to the well-being of individuals and society. This singular motivation is at the same time both the source of his religion and his irreverence. In Russell's view religion had simultaneously provided and prevented the realization of traits he valued in individuals and in society. The religious instinct is conceived by Russell as extremely pliable, tending either to good or to evil. Religion, then, is not an unmitigated good, nor is it an unalloyed evil.

But Russell's tremendous aversion to our inhumanity to one another found focus in those forms of religion conceived and nourished by fear. In *Why I Am Not a Christian*—a work of pure agnostic apology without one good word for religion in any of the fifteen essays—we are told in the most famous essay of the group that "Fear is the basis of the whole thing—fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death" (*WINC*₂, p. 22). Russell's own search for a personal religion and any accolades for it had to be tempered with his recognition that religion could crush civilization as easily as it could guide it.

Brandishing philosophical weapons and with oratory reminiscent of Tom Paine in 1789, Russell's writings on religion bristle with condemnations of any religion that impedes the progress of civilizing humanity. In *Why I Am Not a Christian*, certainly his most widely read book on religion, he charges that:

The knowledge exists by which universal happiness can be secured; the chief obstacle to its utilization for that purpose is the teaching of religion. Religion prevents our children from having a rational education; religion prevents us from removing the fundamental causes of war; religion prevents us from teaching the ethic of scientific co-operation in place of the old fierce doctrines of sin and punishment. It is possible that mankind is on the threshold of a golden age;

Churches" (*Education and the Social Order* [London: Allen and Unwin, 1932], p. 67).

but, if so, it will be necessary first to slay the dragon that guards the door, and this dragon is religion."¹¹

In light of such denunciations as these, Russell has justifiably been compared to Voltaire on religion. This legacy has been nourished by champions and assailants of Russell and flourishes in the focus on his penchant for criticizing the failings of religion. His qualified sympathies for religion, however, have been obscured by his audiences and his own skill and tenacity at chronicling the falsities and foibles of religion. The resulting interpretation of Russell on religion, however, owes its ultimate origins to his belief that there were things wrong with the world, and that on balance religion was a major contributor to this state of affairs and a comparatively meagre contributor to progress. Russell's concern about the perception of his religious views, therefore, fell somewhat logically to favouring his opposition to religion. In this opposition he usually appears to be unrelenting in his attempt to castigate, and distance himself from, any sympathy for religion.

Though Russell was actually an agnostic on the chief assertion of religion—he claimed that atheism was as presumptuous as theism—he was, by his own admission, practically speaking an atheist. While no notoriety need attach itself to an intellectual in our age for unorthodox religious opinions, Russell's habit of speaking unabashedly about his views on religion earned him the well-known reputation as an enemy of religion. Unlike scores of other thinkers, he was not content to keep his views inside the ivory tower, or even on the printed page. He was always ready to lend his thought to the cause of free thought—but especially when his opposition to religion was suspect. It may not have been suspect in 1927, when his notorious essay "Why I Am Not a Christian" was born. When the essay was reprinted in a volume with that deliberate title, in the preface Russell expressed annoyance at rumours of a lessening hostility by him towards religion, reiterating that religion remained "both untrue and harmful". In his *Autobiography*, to remove the belief that he had become a Christian due to "lax use of the suspect adjective" after commending "Christian love" to an audience at Columbia University, he recommends to the reader that same volume of essays (*Auto* 3: 30).

¹¹ "Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?", in *WINC*₂, p. 47.

If Russell had desired his reader to have the “essential Russell” on religion, however, he would not have chosen *Why I Am Not a Christian*. His views on religion were most often articulated as his views on wrong religion because most religion was wrong religion in Russell’s view. Good religion was difficult to commend when an abundance of bad religion was present. However, writing to Lady Ottoline Morrell in 1911, with whom he often crossed swords on religion, he says:

But it interests me far more to try to preserve what I value than to attack what I disagree with. Only, I think the absolute fearless pursuit of truth is the first condition of right-thinking for me and for all who spend much time on abstract thought. And so attacking what seems to me comfortable fictions is bound up with my positive beliefs, and has to be done along with the rest.¹²

However, it was Russell’s predominantly negative assessment of religion that prompted Edgar Brightman to contend that Russell’s religious sympathies were a “side of Russell that is unsuspected by many of his readers”. Russell’s effort to hold both sides together settled to the periphery—as it might for anyone who militantly attacks religion. It is, however, as noted by Russell, his positive beliefs which are the source of his attacks on religion. His irreligion, then, can hardly be separated from the things he valued. But he habitually found the attack on “comfortable fictions” a consuming task, forging his legacy as one of the great mockers of religion. This was a reputation that, though not preferred by him early in his public life, was one that in time he rather came to savour, especially after World War I. Attacking comfortable fictions took on more importance and urgency in an uncomfortable world.

When George Santayana levelled the charge of “religious conservatism” at Russell’s views, the occasion might have proved a valuable one for Russell to have divulged something besides his opposition to religion, but instead he countered the charge by buttressing the prevailing view of himself as a mocker of religion: “I will leave the reader to form his own judgment on that matter.”¹³ The high calling in his remark to Lady Ottoline was typically lost in his opposition to religion. In the essays in *Why I Am Not a Christian* religion manages only two dubious credits:

¹² Letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell, 10 April 1911, quoted in Clark, pp. 158–9.

¹³ “George Santayana”, in *PfM*, p. 98.

fixing the calender and aiding the chronicling of eclipses. After this list Russell adds: “but I do not know of any others” (*WINC*₂, p. 24). A positive place for religion in negative contexts was typically passed over.

Nonetheless, on rare occasions, the two could be brought together in the same place. In *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, a work written during World War I and before Russell gained notoriety for his negative views on religion, he expressed a view of religion that even at the time of his response to Brightman in 1944 Russell referred to as the “least unsatisfactory”.¹⁴ There are two passages in this work, like the pair examined from the *Autobiography*, where Russell appears to say two different things about religion. These statements appear to be in conflict, but on inspection they interface at some points while revealing again the distinctions within Russell’s religious views. The first statement is on thought:

Men fear thought as they fear nothing else on earth—more than ruin, more even than death. Thought is subversive and revolutionary, destructive and terrible; thought is merciless to privilege, established institutions, and comfortable habits; thought is anarchic and lawless, indifferent to authority, careless of the well-tryed wisdom of the ages. Thought looks into the pit of hell and is not afraid. It sees man, a feeble speck, surrounded by unfathomable depths of silence; yet it bears itself proudly, as unmoved as if it were the lord of the universe. Thought is great and swift and free, the light of the world, and the chief glory of man. (*PSR*, pp. 165–6)

What makes thought so feared is that it reveals truth to be as fearsome as itself. Indeed, thought and truth are interchangeable in the first half of the paragraph; in the last half ethical prescriptions are laid upon thought in the face of truth. Truth, as revealed by thought, is hard for man because it takes no thought of him, or of anything else. Man, however proudly, stares into the pit of hell, not the beatific vision. Thus, though thought be unafraid, it is hardly felicitous. Because truth is painful rather than pleasant, the temptation for religion is present; here, however, support for thought takes place with religious imagery pressed into secular service. In this extraordinary paragraph, Russell the liberal, the free-thinker and the humanist, exalts man’s grandeur in religious phraseol-

¹⁴ “Reply to Criticisms”, in Schilpp, p. 726; *Papers* II: 52.

ogy: lord of the universe, light of the world. Though thought in the passage is merely free thought, it sounds like Hegelian Thought or Reason. The passage could have been part of an address to the National Secular Society. Eighty pages later is a passage on man the feeble speck. It could have been delivered from a pulpit:

The world has need of a philosophy, or a religion, which will promote life. But in order to promote life it is necessary to value something other than mere life. Life devoted only to life is animal, without any real human value, incapable of preserving men permanently from weariness and the feeling that all is vanity. If life is to be fully human it must serve some end which seems, in some sense, outside human life, some end which is impersonal and above mankind, such as God or truth or beauty. Those who best promote life do not have life for their purpose. They aim rather at what seems like a gradual incarnation, a bringing into our human existence of something eternal, something that appears in imagination to live in a heaven remote from strife and failure and the devouring jaws of Time. Contact with this eternal world—even if it be only a world of our imagining—brings a strength and fundamental peace which cannot be wholly destroyed by the struggles and apparent failures of our temporal life.

(*PSR*, p. 245)

In this passage the Romantic suggests that thought attach itself to one of the transcendentals: God, truth, or beauty. Thought is noble to the extent that it is emancipated from the thought of self and attached to one of these. To make a better world the objects of thought cannot be of this world—though they are. The world, having been deprived of a theological metaphysic or a suitable philosophical substitute, points humanity back to itself. But Russell is reticent to assign the locus of value in the universe to its human inhabitants because he fears that they may never rise higher than themselves. They need something larger than themselves in order to make themselves larger. A theological or a philosophical doctrine could have provided this, but in their absence an eviscerated transcendental will have to do.

What Russell writes here must nonetheless weather the realization that the transcendentals are but the creations of humans finding themselves as feeble specks in the silent universe. With this realization one can choose to salvage transcendentals as guiding lights for human life, or one can choose to acknowledge that all the light there is in the world is human light, and thus humanity is the light of the world. The latter choice is one that gave Russell considerable pause, and a reticent acquiescence:

Those who attempt to make a religion of humanism, which recognizes nothing greater than man, do not satisfy my emotions. And yet I am unable to believe that, in the world as known, there is anything that I can value outside human beings, and, to a much lesser extent, animals. Not the starry heavens, but their effects on human percipients, have excellence; to admire the universe for its size is slavish and absurd; impersonal non-human truth appears to be a delusion. And so my intellect goes with the humanists, though my emotions violently rebel. In this respect, the "consolations of philosophy" are not for me.¹⁵

III

However negatively Russell was to speak about religion when speaking about bad religion, some form of personal religion, however evil its larger history, was, in Russell's view, needed for good, and evidence for the need can be found scattered across his writings. It was a notion that the circumstances of Russell's life did not permit him to develop, but neither to abandon, although sympathy for religion seems to progressively diminish during his long life. The increasing frustration with religion, however, might be seen as a frustration with humanity's inability to direct itself towards the commendable features of religion.

Russell's combating of bad religion masked his sympathies for a form of personal religion, while his predominantly negative writings require some careful sifting to find a form of personal religion. This was one reason that his daughter, Katharine Tait, drew a picture of Russell so contrary to the legacy of Russell the mocker of religion, for she knew him better than anyone who knew him through his writings alone.¹⁶

Russell saw in religion some capacity for good while he also believed that much of the evidence of history showed a great and seemingly greater capacity for harm. This meant, as noted earlier, that Russell could ascribe mixed motivations in the origin of religious feeling. This perspective is typified in a passage from *A History of Western Philosophy*:

There are two sorts of saints: the saint by nature, and the saint by fear. The saint by nature has a spontaneous love of mankind; he does good because to do so gives him happiness. The saint from fear on the other hand, like the man

¹⁵ "My Mental Development", in Schilpp, pp. 19–20; *Papers* II: 17.

¹⁶ *My Father Bertrand Russell* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975; Bristol: Thoemmes P., 1996).

who only abstains from theft because of the police, would be wicked if he were not restrained by the thought of hell-fire or of his neighbour's vengeance.

(*HWP*, p. 768)

According to Russell it was the latter type of saint who had the greater share in the history of religion. Without minimizing the contribution to civilization of the preferred kind of saint—and Russell not infrequently conceded their contribution—it was not they who proved a menace to humanity. Since the saints by fear greatly outnumbered the saints by nature, Russell gave more of his time to writing against the former than he did commending the latter. In a world which had misused the religious impulse, commending religious sympathies would be at the risk of neglecting a weightier priority. Russell's choice of emphasis is more a matter of expediency rather than of personal choice—as indicated in his letter to Lady Ottoline quoted above.

Thus, the same Russell who charged religion with being “a source of untold misery to the human race” and “hoped it would die out”, also said that if the feelings giving rise to religion should die “most of what is best would vanish out of life” (*PSR*, p. 208). With the latter assessment of religion Russell is, of course, speaking of the saint by nature, not the saint by fear—but also of religion divorced from erroneous theologies and powerful organizations. Despite such qualifications, religious expression could still resonate with Russell because it had something to contribute to humanity:

What is of most value in human life is more analogous to what all the great religious teachers have spoken of.¹⁷

In art and literature and religion, some men have shown a sublimity of feeling which makes the species worth preserving.¹⁸

These sentiments are on occasion wrapped in some of Russell's writings most hostile to religion. For example, in *Religion and Science* Russell paused to say:

¹⁷ *Power: a New Social Analysis* (New York: Norton, 1938), p. 302.

¹⁸ “Man's Peril”, in *PfM*, p. 238.

I cannot admit any method of arriving at truth except that of science, but in the realm of the emotions, I do not deny the value of the experiences which have given rise to religion. Through association with false beliefs, they have led to much evil as well as good; freed from this association, it may be hoped that the good alone will remain.¹⁹

Here the religious instinct is treated with respect when it is distanced from false beliefs and harmful consequences. Also to be noted is that the mottled record of religion can be improved by discarding false beliefs, which in the past provided “much evil as well as good”. Similarly, in *A History of Western Philosophy*, not a work known for any charity toward religion, Russell writes that

In the sphere of thought, sober civilization is roughly synonymous with science. But science, unadulterated, is not satisfying; men need also passion and art and religion. Science may set limits to knowledge, but should not set limits to imagination. (*HWP*, p. 16)

Here religion, along with passion and art, is not set in the normal juxtaposition with science, but instead is portrayed as something needed for civilization. Religion thus displays again an ambiguous position in its relation to civilization.

Perhaps Russell's most revealing statement of his position on religion was penned in a letter before the notoriety of his anti-religious views eclipsed the attention he gave to the positive function of religion. The letter conveys an attitude that I believe he never repudiated, though in the necessity of confronting religion as he encountered it, it was an attitude scarcely audible over the denunciations of religion. Though lengthy, the passage is deserving of full quotation:

It seems to me that our attitude on religious subjects is one which we ought as far as possible to preach, and which is not the same as that of any of the well-known opponents of Christianity. There is the Voltaire tradition, which makes fun of the whole thing from a common-sense, semi-historical, semi-literary point of view; this, of course, is hopelessly inadequate, because it only gets hold of the accidents and excrescences of historical systems. Then there is the scientific, Darwin-Huxley attitude, which seems to me perfectly true, and quite

¹⁹ *Religion and Science* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1961; 1st ed., 1935), p. 189.

fatal, if rightly carried out, to all the usual arguments for religion. But it is too external, too coldly critical, too remote from the emotions; moreover, it cannot get to the root of the matter without the help of philosophy. Then there are the philosophers, like Bradley, who keep a shadow of religion, too little for comfort, but quite enough to ruin their systems intellectually. But what we have to do, and what privately we do do, is to treat the religious instinct with profound respect, but to insist that there is no shred or particle of truth in any of the metaphysics it has suggested: to palliate this by trying to bring out the beauty of the world and of life, so far as it exists, and above all to insist upon preserving the seriousness of the religious attitude and its habit of asking ultimate questions.²⁰

But it was in the Voltairean tradition that Russell took his place, pushed there, I have contended, by the circumstances that he found in the world. I believe Russell would have preferred not to have taken that stance, as indicated in his letter to Lady Ottoline quoted above, and in the letter to Dickinson. But Russell was pushed, by the features of falsity and cruelty and inhumanity that accompanied bad religion, into a fight against religion itself that he could relish as one of his chief contributions to a world gone awry.

IV

Russell's manner with religion can suggest a profitable comparison to Whitehead. In *Religion in the Making* Whitehead punctuates that work periodically with his view that "Religion is the last refuge of human savagery. The uncritical association of religion with goodness is directly negated by plain facts."²¹ But in the sentence following this warning Whitehead presents a contrasting claim: "Religion can be, and has been, the main instrument for progress."

How could it be both and could Russell have said as much? Russell does say by way of implicit agreement with Whitehead that "He was at all times deeply aware of the importance of religion."²² But the fact is that Whitehead presents something of a tenuous equilibrium on the relations of religion, cruelty, and progress, whereas Russell most often

presents religion and cruelty in contrast to human progress. I am not sure, however, that Russell's view, considered in its entirety, and drained of its notoriety, would be substantially different from the positive view expressed by Whitehead. But Russell's portrayal of religion tilts toward reckoning religion as a greater factor in cruelty than for progress. Thus, his posture on and depiction of religion often seems all of a piece—even though he does not "consider all forms of religion not only false but harmful".

I have contended that Russell's concern about the perception of his religious views favoured his opposition to religion because although he held a view of personal religion as vital to humanity, he regarded religion in its organizational and theological or metaphysical aspects as having brought a preponderance of inhumanity to the world. With these conceptions, the fight against bad religion rarely gave Russell pause to indicate his belief that there could be religion of another kind. Under the weight of confronting the problems of his world—problems to a great degree, in Russell's view, created or sustained by religion—he spoke much more about religion as contributing to the problems and rather less as contributing to any betterment of humanity. Russell's criticism of religion proved to be a formidable, though necessary, task in his eyes, but it resulted in his increasingly diminished favour toward any positive view of or place for religion—including his own. This is why he favours his negative views on religion, and why, when his own views are at issue, he most often shows scant concern to speak of religion as a positive influence on humanity.

²⁰ Letter to G. Lowes Dickinson, 16 July 1903, in *Auto.* 1: 186–7.

²¹ *Religion in the Making* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), p. 36.

²² "Alfred North Whitehead", in *PfM*, p. 103.