

# The Bertrand Russell case

by Marshall J. Gauvin

---

*[Marshall Gauvin (1881–1978) was a well-known Canadian freethinker and the author of many pamphlets. He remained active until very late in life. The following lecture was delivered to the Winnipeg Humanist Society on 14 April, 1940. It is published here with the permission of Mr. Gauvin's executor.]*

BERTRAND RUSSELL IS one of the clearest headed men living. He ranks among the world's foremost mathematicians and philosophers. His wide-ranging culture places him among the few best informed men of the age. His penetrating analysis of the universe and his contributions to the social sciences place him among the great intellectual leaders of the world. His many books, all brilliantly clear and thoroughly sane, give him a high place in the history of education. Beyond question, Russell is one of the most civilized and valuable men living.

A little while ago, this great Englishman, who is now a teacher in the University of California, was appointed by the Board of Higher Education of the City of New York, Professor of Philosophy at City College, New York. Some religious interests of New York brought suit in court against the Russell appointment, pleading that the philosopher, on account of some of his opinions, was not a fit person to teach in a school in the State of New York, and the judge of the court handed down a judgment declaring the

appointment null and void.

The case has aroused a tremendous furore in New York and elsewhere in the United States. It has brought into bold relief the clash between religious reaction and higher education. It has furnished a signal example of the power of tradition to silence the teacher who would impart scientific views of life. The decision of the court is a denial of academic freedom, in the interest of popular ignorance and obscurantism. Whether or not an appeal will be made to a higher court, I do not know. Meanwhile, the case stands as a challenge to those who fear the light to the right of men and women to see and understand life as it is. For Bertrand Russell is a thinker whose thoughts represent in greater or less degree an understanding of life, and the question is whether or not people shall be allowed to know and judge of the value of his thinking.

Let us look briefly into this thinker's thinking in various fields, including the thinking to which some of the people of New York have taken exception. But first, a word about the man himself.

Bertrand Russell is, by right of birth, a member of the British aristocracy. He is the third Earl Russell; but he never uses this title. His real title to distinction is the possession of an intellect the like of which rarely appears either among the nobility or elsewhere. He was born sixty-seven years ago, of freethinking parents. His mother died when he was two years old; his father when he was three; and it was not until he had grown up that he learned that his parents had been un-believers in the popular religion.

He lived with his grandmother, who, at the age of seventy, had become converted from Presbyterianism to Unitarianism. As a child, he was taken on alternate Sundays to the Episcopalian Church and to the Presbyterian Church, while at home he was instructed in the doctrines of the Unitarian belief. He learned early, therefore, that the Bible is not the infallible word of God and that Christ was not a divine being. The doctrine of evolution was accepted among instructed people, but Russell remembers that when he was eleven, his tutor, a Swiss Protestant, said to him: "If you are a Darwinian, I pity you, for it is impossible to be a Darwinian and a Christian at the same time." The boy did not then know what he afterwards learned—that the claim that Christianity is a divine religion is irreconcilable with the doctrine of

evolution.

At the age of fourteen, he entered upon a course of study, with a view to determining whether there was any ground for supposing religion to be true. This led to his giving up belief in the doctrine of free will. He reached the conclusion that if all the motions of matter are determined by the laws of dynamics, such motions could not be influenced by the human will. He now began to doubt the dogma of immortality. He retained belief in God until he was eighteen, when, in reading John Stuart Mill's autobiography, he met with Mill's argument showing that the doctrine of a First Cause is a fallacy. Having outgrown belief in religion, "to my surprise", he says, "I found myself much happier than while I had been struggling to retain some sort of theological belief".

But it was not until he went to Cambridge University that he met people with whom he felt free to discuss religious questions. Leaving Cambridge, he spent two winters in Berlin, where he applied himself chiefly to the study of economics. Then came a trip to the United States, where in 1896 he lectured at Johns Hopkins University and Bryn Mawr College, on non-Euclidean geometry. In his wide stride, he took in, among other things, the art galleries of Florence, with the study of distinguished literature.

He wanted to know truth. So he was overjoyed, when, at an early age, his elder brother offered to teach him Euclid, for he had been told "that Euclid proved things". But he was gravely disappointed when he saw that Euclid started with axioms. At the reading of the first axiom, he said he saw no reason to admit it. He continued the study, however, but his belief that "somewhere in the world solid knowledge was obtainable had received a rude shock". The effort to discover really certain knowledge in the field of mathematics occupied him until he was thirty-eight. He had now gone as far as he could go in this direction, but he was yet far from having reached the certainty he sought. In collaboration with the English philosopher, Dr. Whitehead, now of Harvard, he had finished his great work, *Principia Mathematica*, when the Great War came.

The war at once taught him what his proper life work should be. He now saw clearly that there was something far more important in life than the pursuit of abstract truth. Earlier practical work had taken the form of speaking and writing on behalf of free trade and

votes for women. He was now filled with "great indignation at the spectacle of the young men of Europe being deceived and butchered, in order to gratify the evil passions of their elders".

He saw that the ordinary virtues—thrift, industry and public spirit—were used to swell the magnitude of the disaster. He rejected the view that the war was due to economic causes. He saw that those most enthusiastic for the struggle were going to lose money by it. He concluded that people fought because they wished to fight, and that thereupon they persuaded themselves that it was to their interest to do so. The whole matter involved "a study of the origin of the malevolent passions, and thence of psychoanalysis and the theory of education".

He began a serious investigation of human nature, of the human mind and its urges, of man in his social relationships; his object being to discover some way in which men, with the congenital characteristics which nature has given them, can be trained to live together in societies without seeking to injure one another. Working as a scientific thinker, he came to place emphasis upon psychology—the way the human mind works—and the practice of judging the value of social institutions by their effect upon human character. This is the keynote of his social philosophy.

As a pacifist who suffered for his views during the World War, he found himself in conflict with some of society's moral rules, among them the rule that money should not be spent on drink, since the money and men at their best were required for work on destruction. He took the ground that money spent on drink would not be spent for the making of high explosives. He agreed with Saint Paul in the important contention that what was required was love—that no obedience to moral rules can take the place of love, but that genuine love, combined with intelligence, will give rise to whatever moral rules society may require.

This is, of course, the long range view. Russell was not supposing that social love could be generated in time to shorten the war that was raging. His doctrine was that the right direction of the human mind would, in time, create such love of humanity as would make men seek one another's good, or at least refrain from making one another miserable.

Russell holds that one of the main causes of social clashes and wars is fear. Men are formidable to one another because they fear

one another. And this fear is a heritage of humanity's savage and barbaric past. It is felt that the best form of defence is attack, and people attack one another because they expect to be attacked. Instinctive emotions inherited from a much more dangerous world predispose men to attack the social environment, with resultant "distrust and hate, envy, malice and all uncharitableness".

But in the world of today, there is no occasion for such fear as dominated primitive man. Man's conquest of nature has made possible a more friendly and cooperative attitude between human beings than was possible formerly, and rational men, cooperating with one another, and using the available scientific knowledge to the full, might now secure the economic welfare of all—a consummation which was not possible heretofore.

So Russell thinks that life and death competitions for fertile territory, however necessary in earlier times, have now become folly. Consequently, he holds the highly civilized view that "International government, business organization, and birth control should make the world comfortable for everybody"—a world in which "everybody could have as much of this world's goods as is necessary for the happiness of sensible people". And once poverty and destitution had been eliminated, men could devote themselves to the constructive arts of civilization—the cultivation of science, the overcoming of disease, the prolongation of life, the freeing of the urges that make for joy.

To those who hold that such ideas are Utopian—unrealizable—Russell answers that the reasons for such a view lie solely in human psychology—not in the unchangeable parts of human nature, but in the influence of tradition, education and example.

Consider international government, which has now become patently necessary if civilization is to be preserved. The willingness of nations to fight for their individual freedom produces international anarchy. This will continue until an armed force, controlled by one world authority, guarantees the security of nations from attack. This organization will create among nations the order that each nation long since created among its individuals.

According to Russell, international anarchy is the product of

men's proneness to hatred and fear. From hatred and fear arise also economic disputes; for the love of power, which is involved in economic disputes, is generally the result of fear. Men wish to be in control because they fear that they will be improperly treated if others are in control. Russell affirms that the same rule prevails in the sphere of sexual morals; that the power of husbands over wives and wives over husbands, which is conferred by law, "is derived from fear of loss of possession". And he insists that "The motive is the negative emotion of jealousy, not the positive emotion of love."

He finds the same sort of fear and repression in the realm of education. The motive in education, he holds, is the positive emotion of curiosity, the desire to know, but the curiosity of the young is severely repressed in many directions—sexual, theological, and political. Free minds are not wanted. Therefore free inquiry is not encouraged. Rather, "children are instructed in some brand of orthodoxy, with the result that unfamiliar ideas inspire them with terror, rather than with interest". These evil results are born of a desire for "security". The pursuit of security is "a pursuit inspired by irrational fears—fears that have become irrational, since in the modern world fearlessness and intelligence, if embodied in social organization, would in themselves suffice to produce security".

The philosopher insists that the road to Utopia, to the grand world of our dreams, is clear. It lies, he says, "partly through politics and partly through change in the individual". The most important of the required political changes is the establishment of an international government. As for the individual, "The problem is to make him less prone to hatred and fear, and this is a matter partly physiological and partly psychological".

Russell assures us that much of the hatred in the world results from bad digestion and inadequate functioning of the glands, which, he holds, may be corrected by a proper regard for the health of the youth. He is satisfied that with our present trends of mind and political organization "every increase in scientific knowledge brings the destruction of civilization nearer".

That pessimistic note is a warning, which, however, he does not accept as final. It is rather a warning which impels him to strive for the realization of the better world which he feels to be within

humanity's reach. That better world is to be achieved through education, through a frank facing and understanding of life, and the bringing about of more rational moral attitudes. From the conviction that a new mentality can create a better world has proceeded, during the past twenty years, Russell's great work in the interest of education.

In his book, *Proposed Roads to Freedom*, he has a striking chapter on "The World As It Could Be Made". In that chapter he speaks of the joys that people may create in their own lives and in the lives of others by thinking in terms of creativeness, rather than in terms of possessions. But here again it is necessary to remove the causes of tyranny and fear. For this, recourse must be had to science.

The philosopher sets great store by the saving power of science. And important in his conception of the value of science is its value in bringing to man a rational view of the universe. For if man is to be free from irrational fears, he must know how to face the problem of existence, not through the eyes of religious mysticism, but through the eyes of reality.

In the article, "What I Believe", which he contributed to *The Nation* in April 1931, he points out that the notion that the universe is a unity is "rubbish". He insists that "the universe is all spots and jumps, without unity, without continuity, without coherence or orderliness" of the kind the preachers love to talk about. He tells us that the physicists who, like Sir James Jeans, think that God must be a mathematician, have been abandoning logic for theology. Science, he insists, does not support the view that the universe is a unity, but on the other hand "modern science considered as common sense, remains triumphant, indeed more triumphant than ever before".

There is, then, no sort of evidence for any kind of ghostly control of the universe. This is the indisputable conclusion of science—of logic that is willing to face its consequence. This, then, at once removes all grounds for religious fear.

Russell insists that a fundamental requirement, if we are going to make the most of life, is that we face reality. This view is brilliantly stated in his essay "A Free Man's Worship"—one of the most challenging statements of our time. In that essay he maintains that science presents us with a picture of a purposeless

universe; that man is a product of forces that had no prevision of what they were achieving; that his thoughts, his sentiments, cannot preserve him as an individual beyond the grave; that the whole temple of man's achievement is destined finally to disappear; that no philosophy which rejects this view can hope to stand. And then he says: "only within the scaffolding of these truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built".

The forces of nature are not good, he contends. And Man must not worship mere power that is evil. The dignity of Man must be exalted "by freeing him as far as possible from the tyranny of non-human Power". We must "maintain our own ideals against a hostile universe". Our true freedom lies "in determination to worship only the God created by our own love of the good". We are invited to "learn, then, that energy of faith which enables us to live constantly in the vision of the good"; and to "descend, in action, into the world of fact, with that vision always before us". Free thoughts will give us a "whole world of art and philosophy, and the vision of beauty of which, at last, we half conquer the reluctant world".

Behold here glorious courage, the audacity of sanity, a sublime exaltation of intellectual freedom, the resolute pursuit of culture, beauty and goodness—the fixed determination to make the most of this strange and wonderful adventure we call life, in a blind and adverse world!

The greater becomes Man's scientific power, the more important it becomes that he should use this power for good rather than for evil. And how that power is to be used will depend upon whether men's emotions are friendly or unfriendly towards their fellows. The problem confronting men of science, therefore, is the problem of devising a method whereby friendly feelings may be generated in mankind and particularly in the holders of power.

Religious preaching, we are told, has not been very effective in its effort to create these friendly emotions. It is a task for science. Some experimentation will probably be required before the correct method of procedure is discovered. "Probably a radical transformation of the economic system is also necessary", says our philosopher. He has no doubt that methods could be devised for creating a world in which most men would be friendly towards

other men. He says that "emotions and sentiments are more important than will". The type of person to be created is the person whose emotions will incline him, without any form of compulsion, to act in a manner which is in the general interest. Such emotions are produced, not by preaching, but by physiological means and by wise condition[ing]. That is, through the correct functioning of the glands, and by means of education.

The moralists, Russell points out, have had very little success in producing character of the desirable type. He is satisfied that where the moralists have failed, the scientists will succeed. For psychology is showing us what can be done with the human mind, and bio-chemistry is discovering how the controlled activity of the glands will enable us to transform human character. The building of character, therefore, is the work, not of the preacher, but of the scientist. Science, then is to be the saviour of man and of society.

It was perhaps to be expected that this clear-headed logician, this lover of truth, who would build the structure of human good on an understanding of the world, should turn his attention fearlessly to the most important problems involved in human relationships.

Life is built on sex. Sex is the most important fact in life. Sex is the driving force of life. The proper attitude towards the question of sex is one of the greatest needs of civilized people.

Bertrand Russell turned his attention towards the question of sex, bringing to bear upon it his knowledge of human nature, his common sense, his ideal of the larger human good. In his books—*Education and the Good Life*, *Education and the Social Order*, *Marriage and Morals*, and in other writings, he advocates a facing of the facts regarding sex and a larger degree of sex freedom. He appeals for sincerity in this important matter, and for what he conceives to be a rational treatment of the facts, in accordance with that sincerity.

That seems to be very sensible. For many centuries the thinking of mankind has been malformed by absurd notions regarding sex. Religion filled the world with sex obsessions that caused incalculable harm. Slowly the world is becoming sane about this matter—coming to see that there is nothing wrong, or debased, or impure, about sex as sex. Certainly the future will view this question with greater understanding than that with which we

regard it. In his writings on sex, Russell is a pioneer. He is a courageous thinker, thinking today the thought of tomorrow.

Well, as I have said, the Board of Higher Education of the City of New York appointed Bertrand Russell to the Chair of Philosophy at City College. Russell was appointed to that professorship because of his great eminence as a philosopher and man of science. But religious bigots in New York, Episcopalians and Catholics chiefly, objected so strongly to the appointment that they brought legal action to have it nullified.

A Mrs. Jean Kay, of Brooklyn, was found to lend her name to a tax-payer's application to the court that Professor Russell be ousted from his position, because of what was described as his "immoral and salacious attitude towards sex". Justice McGeehan, of the Supreme Court of New York, upheld the application, and so forbade Professor Russell to teach at City College.

Before the Court action was taken, there were storms of protests by religious and civic groups against the appointment. These were followed by a meeting of the Board of Higher Education, at which the appointment of Professor Russell was re-affirmed by a vote of eleven to seven.

The petitioner contended that Russell's writings are notoriously "immoral and salacious". They are neither. Russell writes in the interest of better morals; that is, a better life. There are morals and morals, and it cannot be immoral to plead for morals that will better serve human needs. And Russell's writings are not salacious. They are scientific. It is no more just to characterize these writings as salacious than it would be to characterize the writings of psychologists and physicians as salacious because they discuss the question of sex. Russell's views are right or wrong—they are not salacious.

In his book, *Marriage and Morals*, Russell speaks in favour of companionate marriage; that is, marriage intended to be without children. He says further that in his judgment "all sex relations which do not involve children should be regarded as a purely private affair". These views were quoted against him by Justice McGeehan. But in a crowded world, which is rapidly producing too many people, what is wrong, what is there immoral, in marriage designed to be without children? And why should sex relations where there are no children be considered the community's

business? How far is society going to go on the assumption that it is properly concerned with all sex relations?

The Judge quoted from Russell's book, *Education and the Good Life*, words in which the philosopher implies that there are cases in which adultery is not to be considered a serious offence. That view the Judge of course, considered terrible. Other passages bearing upon sex matters also were cited, with profound disapproval by the Judge.

Now, these suggestions and views, to which the court took exception, are all in the nature of moral teaching. They are based upon life as we know it; and they are written in the interest of a wiser treatment of existing conditions, of larger personal freedom, and of an improved individual and social life. The sex facts with which Russell deals may be in part ignored, but they cannot be suppressed. They have profound effects upon life, and much evil results from their being wrongly dealt with. Russell sincerely faces these facts, as some other writers are doing, and offers his judgment as to what should be done about them.

His views are right, or they are wrong. That is a matter for argument. There arises then the question: How much soundness is there in them? And this question can hardly be settled by a court judge who denounces the philosopher's views as immoral, without showing the slightest intimation that humanity's judgment of sex morals as of other things is in progress of change.

Yet this Judge denounced Russell as a immoral man, condemned his writings on sex as "filth", and said that the appointment of the philosopher to teach in City College would be "in effect establishing a chair of indecency". No wonder Russell said of this Judge: "Obviously he is a very ignorant fellow."

Russell's very genius, his towering reputation, his engaging personality, all were cited by the Judge as constituting an influence that would help him to make him a menace to the morals of youth.

But it was not to be Russell's province to teach young people morals. It was to be his business to instruct them in philosophy, in the logic of mathematics. Still, his views on the question of sex were held to render him unqualified to teach abstract truth!

That in a city that for many years has been controlled by Tammany, one of the most thoroughly corrupt political machines

in the world—dominated by Catholics—with no effective protest from any religious body; that, in a city that illustrates all the sexual evils to which Russell draws attention and which might be improved by the adoption of his enlightenment.

Years ago, Russell wrote the following: “The habit of considering a man’s religious, moral, and political opinions before appointing him to a post or giving him a job is the modern form of persecution, and it is likely to become quite as efficient as the Inquisition ever was.”

New York has just witnessed in the case of Russell himself an example of this form of persecution. It is persecution for opinion’s sake. It is a form of Inquisition. It is a case of bigotry and hypocrisy masquerading as superior virtue and punishing the expression of honest opinion.

The protests of numerous educators and students show, however, that the reactionaries are not having matters all their own way in this case. The case may be appealed. But whether it is appealed or not, Russell will not be injured, and the movement of the human mind toward sensible views of life will continue its forward march.