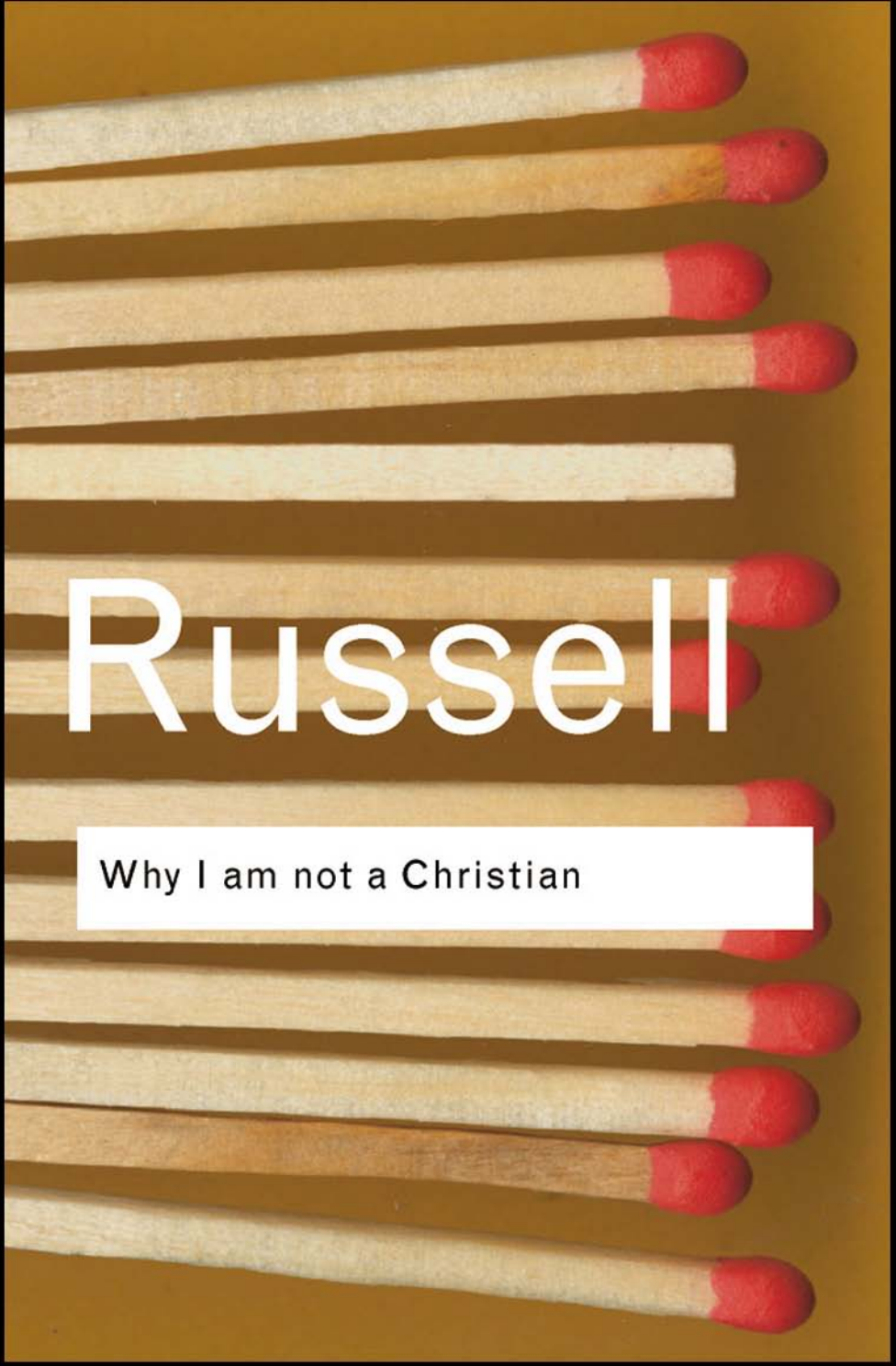

Why I am not a Christian

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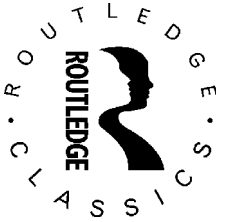

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Bertrand
Russell

Why I am not a Christian

And other essays on religion and related subjects

With a new preface by Simon Blackburn

London and New York

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Contents

Preface to the Routledge Classics edition

In London *The Times* reported quiet days at the beginning of March, 1927. In the shires, hunting was only moderate, but in London, following an anonymous telephone call, there was hope that the stolen £20,000 necklace belonging to Mrs Bruce Ismay might be retrieved. For seventy-three pounds and ten shillings the Church Travellers Club would take you to Palestine, Egypt, Athens and Constantinople. There were a lot of advertisements for parlourmaids, but few would be on the Church trip, since the modest-sounding sum represented a good year's wages. Many letters to the Editor concerned a proposed reform to the prayer book; indeed the Bishop of Norwich gave a special meeting about this reform ('Brigadier-General H. R. Adair, who presided, said that what was wanted was not a new prayer book but a book of discipline'). Church events were extensively reported.[1]

[1] Some things do not change. The Foreign Secretary, Sir Austen Chamberlain, declared in Parliament that he had two incontrovertible proofs that the famous Zinoviev letter that had brought his party to power was not a forgery. Unfortunately he was not at liberty to disclose the proofs. This was only natural, since the proofs were provided by the very Foreign Office and security services that had originally leaked the letter, probably after having it forged.

About the only event *The Times* did not announce was the Sunday lecture of the South London Branch of the National Secular Society in Battersea Town Hall on 6 March, and neither did it report it afterwards. The lecture was 'Why I am not a Christian', the most famous and most forthright of Bertrand Russell's many writings about religion.

It has been fashionable to decry Russell's lecture, and subsequent writings on religion, as shallow and unspiritual, inadequate to the depths of the subject. The high-minded patronizing of Russell says, in effect, that if religion were mere superstition, Russell would be relevant, but it is not, and he is not. The first such attack came in August of the same year, from the newly religious T. S. Eliot, in his journal *The Monthly Criterion*.[2] Since Eliot anticipates most subsequent criticism, I shall concentrate on the issues as he raises them.

Eliot seizes upon Russell's words 'I do not think that the real reason why people accept religion is anything to do with argumentation. They accept religion on emotional grounds'. 'What he does not remark explicitly, though I am sure he would admit it', says Eliot, 'is that his own religion also rests entirely upon emotional grounds'. Eliot disdainfully cites the emotional rhetoric with which Russell winds up his lecture, quoting the peroration 'We want to stand upon our own feet and look fair and square at the world . . . Conquer the world by intelligence, and not merely by being slavishly subdued by the terror that comes from it . . .', remarking contemptuously that Russell is very keen on standing up rather than sitting down, and his words will 'stir the hearts of those who employ the same catchwords as himself'.

Eliot's short counterblast goes on through three phases. He agrees with Russell that fear, which Russell sees as the force that propels religion, is generally a bad thing. But he urges that a

[2] *The Monthly Criterion*, vi, August 1927, p. 177.

skilled theologian would distinguish good from bad fear, and insists that a proper fear of God is a very different thing from fear of burglars, insolvency, or snakes. He does not specify any farther, but we can suppose him to have had in mind fear of God as some kind of remedy for existentialist fear, fear of rootlessness, the loss of bearings in an amoral and meaningless world.

Eliot goes on to point out that Russell's arguments are all quite familiar. This is in a sense true, given that we have read Hume or Kant or Feuerbach, although few would claim to remember, as Eliot says he does, that the problem of the regress of causes, that Russell says he learned from Mill, 'was put to me at the age of six, by a devoutly Catholic Irish nursemaid'. But if Eliot is right that Russell's essay is not philosophically original, he is wrong to imply that arguments are any the worse for being familiar, as if they thereby lose their title to control our beliefs.

Finally, and far more importantly, Eliot claims that in these matters Russell ought to agree that it is not what you say, but how you behave, that counts, and hence that 'Atheism is often merely a variety of Christianity'. There are many varieties of Atheism, Eliot says, such as the 'High Church Atheism of Matthew Arnold' or the 'Tin Chapel Atheism of Mr. D. H. Lawrence'. Eliot winds up: 'Just as Mr. Russell's Radicalism in politics is merely a variety of Whiggery, so his non-Christianity is merely a variety of Low Church sentiment. That is why his pamphlet is a curious, and a pathetic, document'. Eliot's polemic may seem perversely beside the point to the many humanists, agnostics, liberals and atheists who have been fortified by Russell's essay for more than seventy-five years. But it deserves attention, not only because it heralds the vicissitudes Russell's essay has had to undergo, but because in a number of respects it takes us closer to the modern world than does Russell. This does not mean that Eliot wins any intellectual argument—far from it—but that he well suggests the cultural atmosphere that would force Russell's Enlightenment