1-1-1997

Bertrand Russell and World Religions a Review Article

William K. Kay
Glyndwr University, w.kay@glyndwr.ac.uk

Recommended Citation

Kay, W. (1997) 'Review Article of Bertrand Russell and World Religions', Journal of Beliefs and Values 18, 2 239-242

Bertrand Russell and world religions

Revd Dr William K Kay
Professor of Theology at Glyndwr University

A review article of:

Bertrand Russell: the spirit of solitude
Ray Monk
London, Vintage, 1997, ISBN 0 099 731131 2 pp xx + 695, paperback, £9.99

address for correspondence
e-mail   W.Kay@glyndwr.ac.uk

c:\doc\jbv\russell.doc

This, the first volume of Ray Monk's acclaimed biography of Bertrand Russell, takes us from 1872 to 1921, when Russell was 49, and concludes during his second marriage and at the birth of his first child.

Russell was born into an aristocratic and distinguished British family. His grandfather Lord John Russell had been one of the greatest statesmen of his day and twice served Queen Victoria as Liberal prime minister. Russell, as a younger son, inherited the title of Earl in 1931 and his sense of being part of the political and cultural establishment gave him the poise to engage vigorously in public debate while at the same time contemptuously rejecting the received opinions of many of his contemporaries.

The young Russell was haunted by memories which made him occasionally doubt the reality of his own existence. His mother and sister died while he was two years old and his father eighteen months later. When he was only six, his grandfather also died and was he was passed into the care of his moralistic maternal grandmother whose religious sensibilities and puritanical instincts forced him, as he later explained, into a life of deceit. Outwardly he was a little angel, inwardly, in the world of books and of thought, he roamed freely. As a gifted child, he had open access to his grandfather's library and a series of excellent tutors. When he was eleven his brother took him through Euclid's propositions and he fell in love with mathematics. Through the years that followed he lost the religious faith his grandmother had tried to instil in him but, when he went to a school for the first time at the age of sixteen, he was disgusted by the coarseness and profanity of his fellow pupils and discovered in the poetry of Shelley a sense of kinship with the elevated philosophical sentiments of *Alastor* and the *Ode to the West Wind*. In later years the dichotomy between the precision of mathematics driven by the demands of logic and the mystical, visionary sense of dazzling ideas unfolding visions of truth would integrate and disintegrate within his mind in a series of rapidly altering philosophical positions and personal relationships. In his *Autobiography*, written towards the end of his long life, Russell expressed these ultimately unresolved tensions by saying 'What Spinoza calls the "intellectual love of God" has seemed to me the best thing to live by... I am conscious that all human affection is to me at bottom an attempt to escape the vain search for God'.

Russell went up to Cambridge in 1890 and revelled in the intellectual stimulation it offered. He read mathematics and moral philosophy, took first class honours in both parts of the tripos, graduated in 1894, married Alys Pearsall Smith at a Quaker Meeting Hall almost immediately afterwards and was elected to a Fellowship in 1895. At this stage he was a monist - 'there is, in reality, despite appearances only one thing'. Coupling this with a version of the ontological argument - that God must exist by definition since failure to exist would entail an absence of perfection - Russell believed that reality must exist since 'if we try to deny reality as a whole, there is no positive ground left as a basis for our denial'. The apparent contradictions caused by the categories of thought that separate out elements of the world from each other, categories like space and time, may be synthesised in successive stages until one reaches the Absolute, which is reality. Russell affirmed this reality to be Spinoza's God which is effectively thought itself. As a consequence of this position, analysis is futile: everything 'is really an adjective of the One'.

With the intellectual radicalism that was characteristic of him, Russell began to question this position before the end of the century. After all, to all intents and purposes, appearance was more important than reality and, when his contemporary G E Moore, wrote a paper arguing that a proposition is something that actually exists and which may be analysed into its constituent parts, the analytic tradition in philosophy could claim to have been born. Russell embraced the new position. Analysis became the order of the day, and analysis was not understood as a linguistic activity but as an ontological one, as an activity that divided the world up so that it makes sense. The world of appearance became the real world, and relations between things in it were real.

In a period of intense creativity Russell then pursued his search for certainty, a search that had an almost religious intensity. He thought certainty was to be found in mathematics and wrote *The Principles of Mathematics* in which he argued that mathematics is a branch of logic built on a the notion of 'class', where class is an extension of a concept. The 'class of married men' can be thought of without collecting all married men together, enumerating them and examining them. The notion of class is therefore logically prior to the notion of number and numbers can be defined from classes. For this reason classes assumed enormous importance for Russell.

Quite suddenly, at the beginning of 1901, he discovered a paradox that was to throw him into despair. The paradox may be expressed like this: most classes are not members of themselves, but some are. The class of non-dogs, being itself not a dog, is a member of itself. Now, all the classes which are not members of themselves may be put together in the class of all classes. But is this class of all classes a member of itself? If it is, it is not; if it is not, it is. As Monk points out, it is rather like defining the village barber as the man who shaves all those who do not shave themselves and then asking if *he* shaves himself or not.

The paradox ate like a cancer at Russell's hopes for absolute certainty and perfection in mathematics. He described his feelings like those of a Catholic who discovers a wicked Pope. Though he worked for nine years on a massive new book, *Principia Mathematica*, with A N Whitehead, he was never able to solve the paradox completely. At this time, too, his marriage with Alys broke down and he isolated himself from the emotional consequences by intense concentration on his work.

In his unhappiness he adopted a deeply pessimistic view of the human condition that was expressed in one of his most anthologised pieces, 'The Free Man's Worship', an essay that argues that, in the light of the ultimate eventual extinction of the human race and the solar system and the impossibility of immortality, 'the soul's habitation' must in future be built on 'the firm foundation of unyielding despair'. As an escape from the unsatisfactoriness of his marriage and the spoilt beauty of mathematics, Russell began to turn his attention to politics and, over the next few years, campaigned vigorously for tariff reform and against conscription for the First World War turning out, as he did so, several books on social philosophy. During the war he was to be jailed for six months in Brixton prison for making remarks prejudicial to Britain's relationship with the United States.

In 1911 Russell gave three lectures in Paris claiming that mathematical logic is important because it refutes both empiricism and idealism (which both assume that all knowledge is derived from the senses). On his way to Paris he began a prolonged love affair with Lady Ottoline Morrell that, with the connivance of Lady Ottoline's husband, was to last on and off for several years. After the arid and repressed emotions of the lifeless marriage to Alys and the battles with the paradox, Russell found himself newly energised with hope and passion. Many of their letters and her diary entries survive.

While their relationship remained happy, Russell tried to write a novel. When their relationship foundered within two years, he turned for consolation to technical philosophy. His basic position came to be very close to that of the British empiricists, but he was always unwilling to admit we have a certainty that the external world causes our sense impressions. Wherever possible we should substitute a logical construct for an inferred entity. Indeed, in a later book he came to carry his conclusion to the point where he argued that both mind and matter are logical constructions out of primitive elements that are neither mental nor physical and that the self is dissoluble into a series of experiences.

After 1918, and when his Fellowship at Cambridge had been stripped from him for his pacifist agitation, he made a living by public lecturing and writing. He travelled, too, and visited the Soviet Union, where he met Lenin, whom he found an insufferable and school masterly dogmatist, and China, where the young Mao heard him lecture but thought him too unrealistic in his advocacy of education as a means of re-forming the thinking of the propertied classes. During this time he felt a fervent wish for children. Ottoline would not marry him and, anyway, suffered gynaecological problems. Dora Black, a young Cambridge feminist, wanted children and fell in love with him. Together they travelled to China where they gave lectures on social issues. She helped to nurse him through a life-threatening bout of pneumonia and then elated him by announcing she was pregnant. They returned to England and Russell quickly divorced Alys, informed Colette, another of his mistresses, and then married Dora, despite her reluctance to bind herself to such a convention. There was something odd about Russell, the despiser of ordinary morality, using all the force of his charm and argumentation to persuade a women into marriage. Yet, Russell's concerns were for the future unborn child. He knew that out of wedlock the child would not inherit his Earldom.

Towards the end of this part of his life, he pursued the notion of belief. If he accepted that there was no fundamental division between the mental and the physical, then what were beliefs? Others who took a monistic view (like William James) thought beliefs were rules for action. Russell wanted a more complex account and came to think that meaning should be understood in very down to earth terms, as the appropriate response to a given stimulus, acquired during normal language development. A proposition then has an objective meaning

which is the fact that would make it true or false and a subjective meaning which is the belief it expresses. Yet, how can beliefs really be expressed in this way, if there is no conscious mind to hold them?

Russell stands at the beginning of the twentieth century as a founder of modernism. He is the person who wishes to improve society through science and logic, who rejects religion and carves out a personal morality that emphasises freedom rather than duty and courage rather than conformity. His philosophical development resonates with religious themes. At different periods he rejects and accepts the notion of the self. He is inspired by the certainties of mathematical truths while wrestling with their contradictions. His early grand synthesis that results in the Absolute is almost pantheistic. There is a parallelism here both between a monotheistic conception of God and an Indian religious submersion of the self in the infinite. Further, while Russell's later analytic methods may have paved the way for the anti-religious British linguistic philosophy of the post-war period and, though he argued vehemently against religion to the end of his life, it is clear from this non-technical and admirable biography that, within the realm of his private passions and relationships, he found the thirst for a God in whom he did not believe inescapable.