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'A good world needs knowledge, kindness and courage. It does not need a regretful hankering after the past or a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago by ignorant men.' (Bertrand Russell) Discuss.

Religion is no longer a cultural fact of life in Britain. The philosopher Bertrand Russell contributed greatly to the liberalisation of outlook which created today's more tolerant age- and the quotation above, which forms the basis of this present discussion, is taken from his 1927 essay *Why I Am Not a Christian*. [1]

To consider Russell's pronouncement in the light of the larger question of whether religion is relevant or helpful in improving the modern world, it is worth examining the implications of the words he uses. Few would dispute that 'knowledge, kindness and courage' are positive, estimable qualities of which it is impossible to have a surplus. When productively deployed they benefit the world in a myriad ways, from strengthening community bonds to helping the disadvantaged. These qualities are by no means attributes solely of those with religious affiliations, which is not to deny the power of religion to inspire altruistic acts. Nor is religion a pre-requisite of those who choose to live according to a shared moral code. In fact, ancient religious texts have provided fecund material to incite stupid, cruel and repressive actions, often because of literalist or 'ignorant' readings. Admittedly, there is plenty of scope for this: the Bible is almost 800,000 words long; the Koran is a mere four-fifths of the length of the New Testament, though a challenging read. Edward Gibbon noted its 'endless incoherent rhapsody of fable and precept' [2]. Throughout history –and still today- zealots have turned faith into a battle cry, using their interpretation of religious texts as justification for violence against those who take a different stance. In the tinder box pockets of the world where social injustice and ethnic animosities exist, religion is more likely to be used to fuel rather than defuse confrontation.

When Russell refers to 'a fettering of the free intelligence by the words uttered long ago', he poses both moral and intellectual objections to religion. He alludes to how religion may actually imprison or constrain rather than boost moral authority. For if an individual's moral authority is derived from pronouncements laid down in a holy scripture or on tablets of stone ('words uttered long ago') it might be argued that individual has been deprived of a vital part of their personal moral development, has missed the opportunity to wrestle with themselves about what is right and wrong, about what constitutes virtue or sin. If we arrive at our own convictions about the right way to live freely rather than by slavishly adopting hand-me down precepts this, it might be argued, is a boost to authentic moral authority. The Catholic Church however would argue that since human beings are totally dependent on God as their creator, 'we are obliged to yield to God the revealer full submission of intellect and will by faith.' [3].

Therefore while morality is perfectly possible without any notion of God, Christian morality cannot exist without God. (This is not to underestimate the degree to which atheists may have also assimilated elements of a moral sense from the Judaeo-Christian tradition, though for many it is the values of the Enlightenment which provide a steer.) From a Christian perspective, the most important, momentous things in world history have already occurred: the Creation, the birth of Jesus, the establishing of the Church. And- since belief in God is allied to belief in immortality- Heaven presumably awaits. For the morally and socially conscientious secularist, unencumbered by a belief in an afterlife, there is an impatience to set as much to rights as possible within a lifetime. For the Christian, on the other hand, there may be a tendency to accept that, as mortals and sinners, we may well not achieve all we wish in one lifetime, but that God will set all right eventually. It is interesting to consider the 'later-rather- than –sooner' attitude of the Church in dealing with or resolving pressing current concerns within its own organisation, two of which are worth touching on. The recent rejection, for instance, of women bishops by the Church of England synod, a regressive stance on equal opportunities, occurred because of lack of consensus, but elicited little more than a phlegmatic 'it'll happen when it is meant to be' response from those clerics who supported the move. By keeping the faith's antique, discriminatory practices, its status is jeopardised. Furthermore it is now commonplace to hear opinions aired across the media from an array of Catholic, Hindu, Sikh, Muslim and Jewish clergy, their religions also exempt from equality laws and compared with whom Anglican legislators seem like radical modernisers. Secondly, within the Catholic Church, the scandals regarding sexual abuse that have emerged in recent years have been addressed in what appears to be a desultory and careless way, suggesting an hierarchical preoccupation with power taking precedence over morality. The Church itself therefore seems at times to lack moral authority.

Elsewhere in *Why I Am Not a Christian* Russell questions the morality of religion head-on: 'I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion, as organized in its churches... is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world' -and he underlines the point that religious precepts date from a time when people were more cruel and would therefore tend to perpetuate inhumanities which the moral conscience of the age would otherwise outgrow.

Russell's principal intellectual objection is that there is no reason to suppose any religion true. The doctrine of faith, defined by the First Vatican Council in 1870, asserts that the one true God, our Lord and creator can be known by the natural light of human reason through created things-a doctrine which, by his own account, propelled Anthony Kenny away from the Catholic priesthood to agnosticism. 'Faith seemed to be a sacrifice of integrity rather than a virtue', he records in his book *A Path from Rome*, saying that 'having rejected the Catholic discipline which insisted that the existence of God was provable no matter what fallacies I might discover in the arguments offered', he could, more dispassionately 'examine the proofs of the existence of God to see whether any of them was valid'.

However, 'fettering of the free intelligence' also suggests the intellectual clampdown imposed by any religion based primarily upon fear. This, Russell avers, is 'partly the terror of the unknown and partly ... the wish to feel that you have a kind of elder brother who will stand by you in all your troubles and disputes...' Religious faith historically has offered believers specious reassurance in comfort and routine. Belief in an omniscient deity gives the solace of feeling they are not alone in the universe, despite any evidence to the contrary, of being part of a grand scheme, that the world is not simply an accident and the comforting reassurance that when a person passes away, they have, despite appearances, merely 'passed over to the other side'. In addition, adhering to the same rules as the rest of the community via shared religious belief is social glue. Nevertheless an increasing number of the UK population agree that 'the words uttered long ago' have no relevance to their lives - with an interesting proviso. Data released last December from 2011 UK Census returns indicates that Christianity- the religion which has been central to the history of Britain for 1,500 years- has declined sharply. Conversely, the number of those who profess no religious affiliation has soared: a quarter of the population, 14.1million, now declare they have no religion, nearly double the 7.7million who said the same thing in the 2001 census. While the Bible may have diminishing influence over lives in Britain, there is an indication that the Koran will continue to exercise a dramatic influence: census returns showed that the growth religion in England and Wales is Islam: almost one in 20 of the population is now a Muslim.

Religion, it would seem, recedes as the world modernises, as science triumphs over superstition, but there is a human condition which persists: the atavistic sense of isolation which religious belief can supposedly alleviate in the faithful- the loyal 'elder brother' referred to by Russell. Roger Scruton's epigram is apposite here: 'The consolation of imaginary things is not imaginary consolation.' Yet this might be seen as tantamount to relying on a guide dog for navigation or a soft toy for comfort. Human beings have evolved to be social and most have an innate sense of the need for rules to facilitate cooperation with others, and herein is an antidote to isolation. Being stimulated to participate fully in the world, to contribute skills, good qualities (including knowledge, kindness and courage) and drive offers a potent deterrent to a feeling of isolation, an antidote to the opiate of reliance on ancient texts as a guide to how the world should be experienced.

Notes

[1] First heard as a lecture on March 6, 1927 at Battersea Town Hall, it was later published in *Why I Am Not a Christian: And Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects* Text: www.positiveatheism.org/hist/russell0.htm

[2] Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 5 Text: www.sacred-texts.com/cla/gibbon/05/daf05010.htm

[3] First Vatican Council (1869 1870) www.ewtn.com/library/councils/v1.htm#4

Websites

2011 Census www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-england-and-wales/stb-2011-census-key-statistics-for-england-and-wales.html#tab---Religion

Books

Sir Anthony Kenny, *A Path from Rome* (1985)

Roger Scruton, *News from Somewhere: On Settling* p19 (2004)