

'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 and religious doctrines no longer belong in a modern, evolving society. The irrational fears that once propelled religion have long diminished as the solutions to those fears are now so easily found in science and reasoning. All the major religions have been dragged forcefully into the modern world with many of them still blindly ignorant to the prevalence of modernity.

If one looks at the world today one cannot help but see a world engulfed by pain and suffering and become impassioned with the desire to make a change. According to Bertrand Russell such a change can be brought about through 'knowledge, kindness and courage' among other things. He was critical of religion, suggesting that the absence of good in the world derives from religion and that whatever comfort religion can provide, the evils it causes greatly outweigh such benefits. Indeed, he went on, religion is a disease based primarily upon fear, which hinders moral and social progress in the world.¹

It therefore follows that to create a more advanced world, free from the grasp of religion, 'courage' is required to persevere against the imminent fear of death or failure. For many people it is fear of the afterlife or else the mere distress of this life which leads to them to follow a certain religion. But their faith does not end within the bounds of their own homes and within the limits of their own mind. Instead, on many occasions, their faith is forced upon others with wars fought in the name of their religion. It is this faith which ultimately divides between 'us' and 'them', the believers and the non-believers, the Muslims and the Hindus, the Jews and the Christians. In every religious war you have each side believing that their fighting will establish the path to heaven, but what this essentially justifies is almost anything, particularly as God appears to be fighting on both sides. This is demonstrated by Steven Weinberg who added that 'with or without religion, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil-that takes religion'.²

The world needs 'knowledge' but not the knowledge obtained thousands of years ago by a supposedly divine source. Religions justify their moral standings upon interpretations of religious texts, where meanings are often ambiguous and views unpalatable. Religion is antiquated and obsolete and science can now answer the questions which once led people to religion. It is a logical fallacy to assume that because an answer cannot be found that the answer must therefore be God. Yet it was this logical fallacy which fuelled the birth of religion. It may have been appropriate to apply this reasoning in a society thousands of years ago. However, whilst developments in logic, reasoning and science, and our acquisition of new knowledge, enable us to acknowledge that the answers to the cause of our creation are both difficult and complex, they do not necessarily point us to an answer of God.

If we consider 'kindness' and compassion we realise that these qualities appear to be lacking in society at present with genocide, war, sorrow and grief being endemic in much of the world. When we ask ourselves why there is this blatant abuse of human goodwill, religion tends to be the cause, with believers convinced that their fighting is not only morally justified but will grant them a one way ticket to the magical utopia of heaven and free from the everlasting torment and fire of hell. As optimistic as such a belief may appear, we surely need love rather than war in the world in order to make it a better place. This is because when love prevails, the need for war and infliction of pain disappears and basic human compassion takes precedence. As such, Russell is right in his belief that a world where kindness is prioritised is a virtuous one and far better than the current world, where attributes such as kindness are so quickly abandoned when one is told to fight in the name of God. Russell

himself argued that through love we could learn to live together and not die together; and through love we could learn to tolerate each other; as this 'is vital to the continuation of human life'.³

In today's society, science provides us with the instruments necessary to establish a comprehensive understanding of the universe, which does not – I must stress - involve the work of a supernatural divine being. Scientists such as Darwin and Einstein have been able to identify the true natural mechanisms required in evolution and the creation of the universe, leaving it no longer necessary for us to invoke God to fill this gap. Russell is correct in believing that what is required is 'knowledge'. With knowledge, one is able to possess all the information necessary to formulate a legitimate conclusion. With knowledge, society can advance and scientific and medical developments can occur; those who are disabled or suffering can have their pain eased through the knowledge obtained through science. With knowledge, quite simply, lives can be saved. This knowledge, together with 'kindliness' and 'courage', would surely create a better world as it would ultimately result not just in human happiness but also human prosperity. If one has knowledge and applies it with kindness and perseveres with courage in the face of defeat and obstacles, then society would benefit a great deal more than if we were to be confined by the past occurrences.

This nicely leads to the second part of the statement whereby Russell argues that one must not be constrained by a 'regretful hankering after the past'. In part this appears to be suggesting that one's examination of history and the mistakes we have made should not become an obsession. It is undeniable that certain events in history, such as the World Wars and genocides, are extremely regrettable and unfortunate circumstances which we should all hope never repeat themselves. However, to be constantly fixated on events which have occurred many years ago is to also live in the past, and therefore not be embracing today's society. On the other hand, I believe that history has a pivotal role in society, educating people and teaching lessons which we can only learn through examination of the past.

Russell concludes the statement with the belief that the words 'uttered long ago by ignorant men' have limited our free intelligence and the ability to acquire and apply new knowledge through our own reasoning. Perhaps the 'ignorant men' Russell is referring to are those who established religion some thousand years ago. Religious believers are obliged to do one thing and forbidden from doing another; all of this limits the extent to which they can truly express their free intelligence. When you have religious scriptures telling you that homosexuality is forbidden, then free intelligence is hindered by the command to believe that it is wrong and sinful. Whilst religion might be regarded by some as a guideline for living, it is merely a set of restrictions established by someone else, dictating how you should live your life and threatening eternal damnation for failure to comply. Religions came about at a time when science was in its infancy, when our understanding of the universe was limited and when there were very few answers to the complex question of our creation. But now that times have changed, it is no longer necessary to organise our lives around the words of men from thousands of years ago who possessed so little of the knowledge we have today.

Stephen Pinker argues that with the decline in religion we have also seen the increase in morality and, instead of a society entrapped by sin, as many religious evangelicals claim, society is actually far more moral than ever before. As such, we have no reason to assume that the authority of 'ignorant men', who are merely a product of their time, is indeed divine. We have clear evidence to illustrate that religious guidance is not essential for a moral society as religion and morality appear independent of one another.⁴

In conclusion, Bertrand Russell was right in his belief that the world no longer needs to be constrained by the tight hold of archaic religions created many years ago. Rather, what the world truly needs is 'knowledge, kindness and courage' and a step towards the future without gazing longingly at the past with regret and

yearning. The fact remains that we are unable to change what has happened in the past, but we can change, create and shape the future. This requires no more 'regretful hankering of the past' and a break from the restrictions of free intelligence imposed upon us by 'ignorant men'.

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References:

¹ Russell, B. Why I am not a Christian: Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization? (1930) Available at: <http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/russell2.htm> Date accessed: 28/12/2012

² Speech in Washington DC 1999 Date accessed: 28/12/2012

³ Russell, B. Face to Face Interview *BBC Documentaries* (1959) Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1bZv3pSaLTY> Date accessed: 28/12/2012

⁴ Pinker, S. Sex Death and the Meaning of Life. *4oD Documentaries 2012* Date accessed: 28/12/2012, Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PJLovKISEfg>