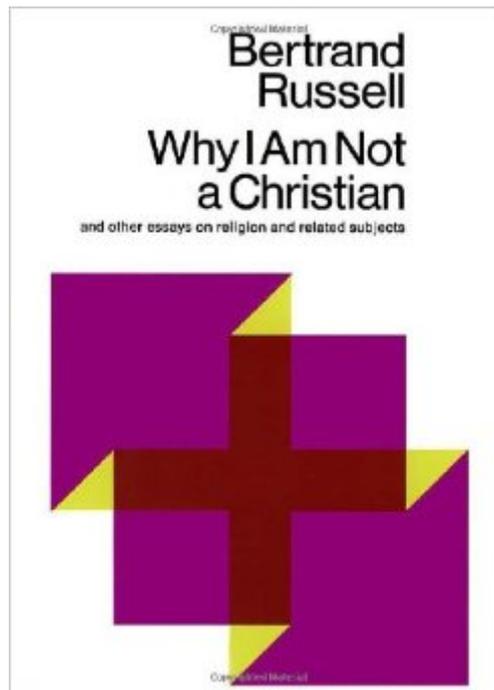


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Why I Am Not A Christian And Other Essays On Religion And Related Subjects



Synopsis

“Devastating in its use of cold logic,” (The Independent), the classic essay collection that expresses the freethinker’s views to religion and challenges set notions in today’s society from one of the most influential intellectual figures of the twentieth century. Dedicated as few men have been to the life of reason, Bertrand Russell has always been concerned with the basic questions to which religion also addresses itself—questions about man’s place in the universe and the nature of the good life, questions that involve life after death, morality, freedom, education, and sexual ethics. He brings to his treatment of these questions the same courage, scrupulous logic, and lofty wisdom for which his other work as philosopher, writer, and teacher has been famous. These qualities make the essays included in this book perhaps the most graceful and moving presentation of the freethinker’s position since the days of Hume and Voltaire. “I am as firmly convinced that religions do harm as I am that they are untrue,” Russell declares in his Preface, and his reasoned opposition to any system or dogma which he feels may shackle man’s mind runs through all the essays in this book, whether they were written as early as 1899 or as late as 1954. The book has been edited, with Lord Russell’s full approval and cooperation, by Professor Paul Edwards of the Philosophy Department of New York University. In an Appendix, Professor Edwards contributes a full account of the highly controversial “Bertrand Russell Case” of 1940, in which Russell was judicially declared “unfit” to teach philosophy at the College of the City of New York. Whether the reader shares or rejects Bertrand Russell’s views, he will find this book an invigorating challenge to set notions, a masterly statement of a philosophical position, and a pure joy to read.

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Customer Reviews

Reading anything by Russell is like sitting in a single-person jury box while evaluating the arguments of a very bright, extremely lucid and highly opinionated attorney who tends to offer well-reasoned analysis but frequently crosses over into the realm of diatribe. As a result, it's very possible to agree with his general arguments despite dismissing some of his more extreme component statements. Before diving into his arguments, it's important to understand the layout of this book, as the title can be a bit misleading. This compilation includes 15 essays written between 1899 and 1954 and a lengthy (25% of the entire work) appendix written by Dr. Paul Edwards on the topic of the 1940 "Bertrand Russell Case." Despite the primary title (taken from one relatively short essay), the work includes topics beyond religion such as the cruelty of the Middle Ages, the heroism of Thomas Paine and grave threat to liberal democracy entailed in declining academic freedom. That said, Russell's views on morality and religion are infused throughout the essays and provide some degree of coherence. Russell's arguments against Christianity generally fall into the following categories: 1) there is no compelling evidence for a Creator (i.e. deism) and much less evidence to believe in theism, 2) the teachings of Jesus, while generally admirable, include many pernicious tenets, 3) Christians have routinely ignored the admirable tenets of Jesus, and 4) the net impact of Christianity has been decidedly negative for mankind. Regarding the first, Russell is on much firmer ground in his criticisms of theism than of deism. He convincingly deals with the First Cause, Natural Law and Morality arguments for a Creator.

Unbelievable. That is the only word for the negative reviews....If you don't want anything other than a good laugh, sort these reviews with the most negative first. Who do these people think they are, calling Bertrand Russell a "fool" and a "hack"? And do those reviewers who cite to Acts of the Apostles and Paul's letter to Romans, the Epistles to Timothy et al, do they really think that is "evidence" to refute Mr. Russell's positions? Many years ago, during my first year in college, my humanities teaching assistant explained to our little section that there are basically two writing styles: Kant and Russell. Russell worked hard to write clearly, and consequently, readers of his works are able to chart the inconsistencies and changes in his philosophy over time. Kant's style, on the other hand, was to write in such a manner that no one in their right mind could be certain what Kant was trying to say. As a result, everyone today still believes Kant to be brilliant. Our section was to strive to be Russell, and not Kant (The success of our striving was largely mixed and

debatable, but that is beside the point). Russell is a good writer--and this book addresses the subject. For me (and I am speaking only for myself here--I'm not calling anyone a fool or a pervert or trying to create a strawman. If you think I am, my e-mail address is available, so please write me--if you care. I'll edit this review), this book addresses Blaise Pascal's rationale for "faith:" If you believe in the christian god, and there is no god--you really have not lost anything. But if you do not believe in the christian god (or whatever system of beliefs is at issue), and it turns out to be "true"--why, you've lost a whole big bunch, swimming around in that lake of fire.....

Like some of the other contributors I have a fondness for this book which arises, I suspect, almost as much from the forthrightness of its title as from its contents. The less positive reviews of this book mainly come from two directions. The first is that some people have been disappointed to find that the book is not a comprehensive case against Christianity, and includes "irrelevant" material. That's because the book is not a manifesto: it's simply a collection of essays on different topics, not all of them about Christianity. "Why I am not a Christian" is the title essay, not the theme of a connected book. In the same way the essay "In Praise of Idleness" is the title essay of Russell's book "In Praise of Idleness", but someone who expects every essay in that entertaining collection to be about idleness will of course be disappointed. Some of the other, stronger, comments appear to be manifestations of the odium theologicae, and unintentionally justify Russell's scepticism concerning the notion that monotheistic belief leads to tolerance, kindness, or even peace of mind. In the title essay Russell outlines his ethical case for rejecting religion. That is, the idea of YHWH or Jehovah or "God" struck Russell as essentially a personification of all that is worst in humanity: cruel, intolerant, vengeful, violent, aggressive, an enthusiastic proponent of the slaughter of people who happen to live in other tribes or believe in a different version of YHWH, and certainly no friend of good things like intelligence, independence or beauty (or animals). Many decent Christians share Russell's ethical revulsion for the wars and persecutions brought about by Christianity and the other monotheistic religions, which continue to the present day.

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