

# A Study Of Religion In Analytic Philosophy With Special Reference To Bertrand Russell

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## Abstract

Russell specially discusses religion in his well known book, 'Why I am not a Christian'. Russell's writings about religion are expressed in the following quote as- "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 for it."<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

According to Russell, Religion is based primarily and mainly upon fear. It is partly the terror of the unknown. It is a kind of fear that wishes to feel like elder brother who will stand by his younger brother whenever he is in troubles and disputes. Religion also involves those kinds of fears like- fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death.

Russell explained that the major factor in religious study is human agent and its relation to the world. In ancient times human beings obeyed and followed the rule of nature. Our daily life activities are also regulated by natural laws. Religion is totally an anthropocentric concept which is associated with society and its individuals sharing their common thoughts, ideas and experiences. The anthropological concept of religion was propounded by M. Reville, who tried to define religion as the idea of a sentiment of bond uniting human mind to that mysterious mind, that of divinity. Regarding this he remarks "Religion', is the determination of human life by the sentiment of a bond uniting the human mind to that mysterious mind whose domination of the world and itself it recognizes, and to whom it delights in feeling itself

united”<sup>2</sup>. So far as it is concerned that religion is totally an anthropocentric concept which is highly associated with society and its individuals sharing their common thoughts, ideas and experiences of daily life, hence it can be said that the concept of religion came in the mind of the primitive people as soon as the idea of society developed.

According to Russell in modern period human being depends upon scientific law. Regarding this he mentioned in his well known book ‘An Outline of Philosophy’, as “If our scientific knowledge were full and complete, we should understand ourselves and the world and our relation to the world and the relation depends upon human agents as how the world acts upon us and how we act upon the world”<sup>3</sup>. It can be explained as there is a mutual alternating depended relation between the learned (Nature) and learner (Human Agent) and we have to maintain that relation as how we behave towards nature and vice-versa. We are totally depended upon the scientific law of nature which regulates our daily life.

Russell asserts that there are three basic elements in religion, i.e.- a Church, a creed or set of doctrines and religious feelings. Russell himself does not admit the earlier two but he accepts religious feelings as an element of religion. Regarding religious feelings, Russell said that feeling and expression are one, and religious feelings just are the feeling about life, fate, memory and loss. Regarding the first two he somehow relentlessly attacked the Church as an organization, and maintained that religious creeds were simply unbelievable to any rational person. But regarding religious feelings Russell admitted it as absolutely central to his life and sense of the world and its place in it.

Religion originates from the feeling of awe. Regarding this Russell quotes as, “I have always ardently desired to find some justification for the emotions inspired by certain things that seem to stand outside human life and to deserve feeling of awe. And so many instincts go with the humanist, but my emotions violently rebel.”<sup>4</sup>

Religion according to Russell has always been deeply concerned with the fundamental questions to which religions have given their respective answers like-

question about man's place in the universe and the nature of good life. Russell also said that in modern time religion is used as a tool to uplift the societal services incorporate with the government services. For an instance Russell explained that in the British House of Representatives there was a Bill to abide by every citizen taking it as an oath to be loyal to God as an essential tool for good governance. According to him, "Service of any person in any capacity in or under government, the legislators officially asserted should be characterised by devotion to God."<sup>5</sup>

The role of religion in our daily life is determinate by the Church and the creeds according to the authority of the Church i.e. The Pope. Its impact on the human civilization is prevalent from the past. According to the authority of the church, religion deals with human behaviour as a whole. But Russell was against the authority of the Church and explained that if human behaviour gives meaning to words (Religious Language) then there will be no need for rituals and ceremonies. And also there will be no distinction between words (Religious Language) or creeds, and rituals or ceremonies.

Regarding religious language and behaviour Russell said that there two types of behaviour of a person, i.e. linguistic and non-linguistic. He also said that a person's mental life is wholly exhibited in their behaviour. Russell advocated that if religious language can express religious feelings then why non-religious language cannot express the religious behaviour of a person. In reply the poet and literary critics like T.S. Eliot said that it is bound to oppose that there is a separation of feeling and expression. And if Russell does not impose this separation then his analytic distinction between religious feelings and expressions cannot stand. Eliot also claimed that Russell betray the essential unity of feeling, words (religious language) and rituals those make up a religious stance towards the world. Eliot also criticised Russell's claim, "I know that my Redeemer liveth."<sup>6</sup>. It does not sound true or false.

Russell advocated Humanism as a religion. In the words of Robert L. Waggoner, Russell said that, "As the saying goes, if a bird looks like a duck, quacks like a duck, waddles like a duck, and swims like a duck, then it must be

a duck. Likewise, if modern humanism claims to be a religion, has characteristics of a religion, acts like a religion, and also has been declared, legally, to be a religion, then it must be a religion, notwithstanding denials now coming from some humanists who previously said that humanism is a religion.”<sup>7</sup>

Regarding critical analysis of Russellian study of religion, T.S. Eliot quoted in the words of Russell as, “I do not think that the real reason why people accept religion is anything do with argumentation. They accept religion on emotional ground”.<sup>8</sup> T.S. Eliot one of the main critics of Russell claimed that Russell himself denied essences of religion like- belief, emotion etc. Russell only accepts reason as the major essence of religion which is based on intellectual argumentation rather than emotion. Russell was against the attitude of blindly accepting superstitious belief on the ground of emotion in religion. But T.S. Eliot aptly remarks that “His (Russell’s) own religion also rests entirely upon emotional grounds.”<sup>9</sup>

According to Russell the objections to religion are of two kinds- intellectual and moral. The former does not deal with the fact that any religious teaching is true. Rather it is concerned with assumption like whether religious teaching is useful. The moral objection deals with religious precepts date from a time when men were crueller than they are, and therefore tend to perpetuate inhumanities which the moral conscience of the age would otherwise outgrow. Russell also propounded that if we believe in Christian religion then our notions of ‘what is good’ is independent to the evidence in favour of useful and to unbelievers it is not useful. But the attitude of believers and unbelievers produce hostility to the evidence and causes us to close our minds to every fact as prejudices. And here Russell’s claim towards belief in religion is lacking behind argumentation whether it is useful or not in practical ground.

So far as it is concerned that one of the major essence of religion is ‘Belief’ and regarding the practical investigation whether religion is true or useful to the society a scientific kind of candour or openness is necessary. However, the scientific religious thinkers like Bertrand Russell emphasizes that though this type of scientific candour exist in human being but regarding

religious belief it is hardly exist in them. It can be highly objected because the importance of 'Belief' factor in religion is prevalent in time immemorial. So, one cannot therefore, really decide whether religion does well without investigating the question whether religion is true. To Christian, Mohammedans, and Jews the most fundamental question involved in the truth of religion is the existence of God. In the day when religion was still triumphant the word 'God' had a perfectly definite meaning. But as a result of the onslaught of Rationalists the world has become paler and paler, until it is difficult to see what people mean when they assert that they believe in God. Regarding God Mathew Arnold's defined: "A powers not ourselves that makes for righteousness.' Perhaps we might make this vaguer, and ask ourselves whether we have any evidence of purpose in the universe apart from the purposes of living beings on the surface of this planet."<sup>10</sup>

According to Russell the decay of traditional religious beliefs were bitterly bewailed by upholders of the Churches. They welcomed with joy by those who had regarded the old creeds as mere superstition. According to Russell it was an undeniable fact. Yet, when the dogmas had been rejected, the question of the place of religion in life was by no means decided. The dogmas had been valued, not so much on their own account, as because they were believed to facilitate a certain attitude towards the world. The habitual direction of our thoughts, a life in the whole, free from the finiteness of self and providing an escape from the tyranny of desire and daily cares.

### **References:-**

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<sup>3</sup> Russell, Bertrand(1927). An Outline Of Philosophy. Routledge Classics, Routledge. USA.p-19.

<sup>4</sup> Russell, Bertrand(1944) My Mental Development; in The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell, edited by Paul Schilip. Cambridge University Press. London. P-19.

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<sup>6</sup> Russell, Bertrand (1957) Why I am Not a Christian. George Allen & Unwin. London. P-XIV.

<sup>7</sup> Waggoner ,Robert L.(1988). The Religious Face of Humanism.p.2

<sup>8</sup> Russell, Bertrand (1957) Why I am Not a Christian. George Allen & Unwin. London.p-VII

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p-VII

<sup>10</sup> Russell, Bertrand (1957) Why I am Not a Christian. George Allen & Unwin. London.p-26