

# BERTRAND RUSSELL'S PRESCRIPTION FOR A SICK WORLD

## A SYMPOSIUM

**B**ERTRAND Russell (to give him the name by which he still wishes to be known, though he succeeded to an Earldom many years ago) recently celebrated his eightieth birthday. Tireless for over half a century in social and political criticism, he has exhibited many changes of opinion but his eloquent and incisive presentation of each view while he held it has been a constant stimulus to thought.

Not long ago the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation arranged a panel discussion on the life work of this famous British philosopher. It was conducted by Dr. J. A. Irving (Chairman), Professor of Philosophy at Victoria College, University of Toronto. Others who participated were Dr. D. R. G. Owen, Associate Professor of Ethics, Trinity College and Dr. E. S. Carpenter, Assistant Professor of Anthropology, University of Toronto.

The panel discussion has aroused such interest that *The Dalhousie Review*, with the permission of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, welcomes the opportunity of reproducing it here.

In order that the reader may not be subjected to the tantalizing limitation of time which is so characteristic of radio forum discussion and that opportunity may be given for leisurely consideration not only of the views of Bertrand Russell, but also of those who participated in the panel discussion, an invitation was extended to Prof. George P. Grant, of Dalhousie, to write a commentary on the symposium.

We are confident that his views, set forth below, will prove no less stimulating and provocative than the panel discussion itself.

The Editor.

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**P**ROFESSOR JOHN A. IRVING: In this symposium we propose to discuss the philosophical views expressed by Bertrand Russell in his series of broadcasts entitled *Living In An Atomic Age*. Within the limits of half an hour it is, of course, impossible to explore all the views which Earl Russell put before us in this series. His career, like

his philosophy, has been rich and varied. He is the grandson of Lord John Russell, a great Prime Minister of England at the height of the Victorian Age; he has been Professor of Philosophy in the Government University at Peking; he is a noble lord, a member of one of the oldest and most famous families of England; he is a Socialist; he is a Fellow both of the Royal Society and of the British Academy; he is a member of the exclusive Order of Merit and a Nobel Prize winner for Literature. He has written forty books and some six hundred articles. Easily the most controversial philosopher of the twentieth century, he combines mathematical logic with modernist ethics, and realistic epistemology with social and economic theories. He has written on China and Russia and the industrial civilization of the West. He has disturbed people profoundly by his lectures on sex, religion, and politics. It is clear that we cannot serve him up whole at a single critical banquet. Before we discuss the salient features of Lord Russell's recent broadcasts, I shall ask a Christian theologian and then a social scientist to state briefly their general positions regarding Russell.

Professor Owen, as a clergyman of the Church of England, what is your attitude to Bertrand Russell?

PROFESSOR D. R. G. OWEN: Like many other philosophers, I have the greatest admiration for Russell. He has been a great man, as any student of modern thought knows. I am glad that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation carried his lectures, because they were full of interest, and they were full of controversy, characteristically of Russell, and I think both of these are good things.

As an Anglican clergyman, of course I regret his oft-expressed antipathy to the Christian religion. I think the explanation of that antipathy is that Russell, like so many of his contemporaries, has never taken the trouble to find out what it is that he is attacking. He has a misconception of the Christian religion. He sets up a straw man and easily knocks him down. Straw men are easily knocked down. The kind of religion that he builds up, and then attacks, is the kind of religion to which I, myself, like all Christian theologians, would be opposed. At the same time I think that many of Russell's ideas are derived from genuine Christianity.

IRVING: Professor Carpenter, as an anthropologist and a social scientist, what is your general attitude toward Russell?

PROFESSOR E. S. CARPENTER: I confess a great sympathy for the philosophy of Russell. It offers a sustained plea for toleration, humanity, and good sense in action, and for empiricism and scepticism in theory. But it is really not enough.

In the social sciences we believe that we must go, and as a matter of fact that we have already gone, well beyond this. In a sense, then, Russell's philosophy merely represents one of the lower rungs on a ladder beyond which we have already climbed.

IRVING: I noticed that in several broadcasts Russell constantly urged us to face the desperate problems of today with a joyous spirit, and not to go about thinking of ourselves as miserable sinners. There can be little doubt that his attitude to sin is different from the generally accepted view in western civilization. As Russell sees it, when a man follows the instincts transmitted to him from his ancestors, the beasts of prey, he calls it sin and asks for forgiveness. Russell argues that this sense of guilt is very bad for us, and he insists that we should abandon the traditional concept altogether. Is Russell's interpretation of sin correct, from the point of view of Christianity?

OWEN: I think that Russell's understanding of what Christians mean by sin is a good example of what I have called his misconception of Christianity in general. Certainly he is against sin. So is Brock Chisholm; so am I. We are all against sin. But what is it?

I think that you have explained it better—at least you have explained Russell's conception of sin—better than he himself in his broadcasts. Clearly from his general writings he associates sin with the natural instincts—with physical desires, like sex, and that kind of thing. So he thinks that the sense of sin is a feeling of remorse when one is carried away by these natural impulses.

That may be the conception of sin in the mystical religions of Greece, and other areas of non-Christian theology. But it is not the Christian conception. In the first place, the doctrine of the creation in *Genesis* makes it quite clear that nature, as a creation of God, is good. God said, after he had completed the creation, in the story, "Behold, it was very good." And that refers to our natural instincts and impulses which are given to us by the Creator.

The sense of sin, in Russell's view, is simply remorse for

obeying these impulses. But both of these ideas are different in Christian theology. Sin is something much deeper than anything which belongs to the natural level of human life. It is a corruption of the self. It is a tendency to put the self in the centre of the universe, to think of ourselves as gods, something which Russell himself deplures.

The sense of sin is the regret that we feel when self-interest leads us to violate those principles of justice, and so on, which Russell himself regards as valid.

IRVING: How does the anthropologist regard Russell's conception of sin?

CARPENTER: What Owen has given us may be a sophisticated theological conception of sin; but it is certainly not the popular one which has figured so largely in western history, particularly in the grey Puritan tradition.

But, be that as it may, I think Russell over-emphasizes the evil inherent in the suppression of what he calls natural impulses. In recent decades many of these prohibitions have been abandoned. But alas! we have not thereby solved all of the evils and problems of the world.

IRVING: Referring to Puritanism, I remember the late Professor A. N. Whitehead once told me that in his younger days Russell was considered a very harsh Puritan. I wonder if it is the fundamental problem today that people are oppressed with a sense of guilt? Does the idea of sin actually make people unhappy? Do the majority of people actually have a sense of guilt? Do not most people we know today actually have too easy a conscience?

OWEN: The sense of sin, in Russell's thinking, is probably related to a Victorian sort of prudery, and his opposition to traditional ethics is based on the fact that mid-Victorian ethics was directed against suppressing the natural instincts—what Carpenter has called "prudery." But that is not Christian ethics, which is something quite different.

IRVING: Russell actually makes a good deal of the evil influence of old-fashioned ideas. I have noticed you suggest he is perhaps a bit mid-Victorian himself. That raises the interesting question, as to how far Russell does actually accept traditional ideas on ethics. Would it be fair to say that Russell is an old-fashioned Victorian, for example, in his ethical ideals?

CARPENTER: Well, yes, like its author, Russell's philosophy is of course dated, not in respect to the truths it enunciates, but in respect rather to the times in which they are enunciated. Because our times, the times in which we live, are already gone into intolerance and persecution in practice. And in the realm of theory, where truth is doubtful and sometimes unknown, it is far gone into dogma, where men hasten to fill in gaps with conjectures.

OWEN: Are the obsolete ideas that Russell is referring to, the traditional ideas of the human race, which go back to Greek philosophy, or are the obsolete truths that he is referring to dated in the 19th century? Obviously, it is the latter, because Russell himself believes very strongly in certain traditional ideas of western civilization—ideals of justice, wisdom, co-operation and brotherhood, which go back at least to the eighth century Hebrew prophets, whom Russell incidentally castigates at one point as having been preoccupied with sin, whereas as a matter of fact they were actually preoccupied with social justice, just as Russell is himself. And he, in enunciating his idea of what is right and wrong, is a traditionalist. And I agree with him in the values that he proposes. But there is nothing new in them. They are traditional ideas.

IRVING: If these ideas have been propounded for thousands of years by Hebrew prophets, Greek philosophers and Christian moralists, why is it that man has not lived up to them?

CARPENTER: I think man has. As a matter of fact the whole of human society is held together by bonds which unite people into the social way of life. Man has no instincts or gregariousness as have some of the infra-human species. On the contrary his society operates on a conceptual level and his philosophy is one of the things that bind all men together. And in that sense they have been successful and they are universal. And no matter how old, they must always be with us.

IRVING: While we are discussing the ultimate values that Russell accepts, we ought to raise the question as to whether he is a nineteenth-century liberal. It has already been suggested that he is mid-Victorian in some of his ethical conceptions. Russell, of course, comes down from the age of John Stuart Mill, and Thomas H. Huxley. He was born in 1872; he is now eighty years old. Is Russell merely a man of the 19th century liberal traditions?

OWEN: Well, he has many of the characteristics of that tradition. One of those characteristics is a kind of idealism, and I think Russell tends to be highly idealistic. There was the notion in the 19th century that if you could simply convince men that they ought to practice these great virtues, these great principles, they would do so, and that it was a matter of education more than anything else.

Carpenter has mentioned the fact that society is actually held together only to the degree that it does actualize principles of justice and co-operation and so on. And that is true, of course. But the fact is that in the twentieth century society does not appear to be held together in any very permanent kind of way.

We are threatened with disintegration and chaos, even within a given society such as our own. And on the international level certainly these principles and standards are not being put into practice. On the international level we have anarchy and chaos; and that is what Russell is worried about.

I think, Irving, that your comment was highly justified, when you said that the real difficulty is, not that we do not know what principles would make a good society, a good international society, but the difficulty we have in putting them into practice.

Why do not people practice justice, co-operation and brotherhood? The Christian answer is that there is something radically wrong with human nature. Self-centredness is always entering in to pervert our knowledge and prevent us from putting these principles into practice. That is the real problem of man.

IRVING: Russell seems to think, Owen, that the real problem of man at the present day is caused by the applications of science. As he sees it, applied science has outrun man's capacity for moral sensitivity and political control.

I have wondered, in listening to these broadcasts, how far Russell's own appreciation of the scientific outlook is restricted. Russell has always appeared before us, in the last fifty years, as the great apostle of the scientific outlook. Russell's appreciation of science seems to me to be restricted to the mathematical and physical sciences. Those sciences are his models.

Is Russell outmoded in his own attitude to science? Has he failed to realize the possibilities of psychology and the new social sciences? Will it ever be possible for the new social

sciences to achieve the same kind of control over society that physics and chemistry now give us over the physical world?

CARPENTER: Yes, I think that will be possible. We mentioned earlier that Russell was a 19th century liberal, and I think this is perhaps both his great strength and his weakness. His strength lies in his eloquent optimism which may serve today to offset some of the despair, the uncritical despair—and studied disenchantment—everywhere among us.

For Russell knowledge must advance; and with that advancement reason and decency must increasingly prevail among men. His philosophy promises to mankind an ever-improving secular future as a necessity of nature itself. Now we are not so sure that human affairs have borne out that expectation. There has occurred a loss of certainty, a revival of pessimism, a return to older outworn ideas; and in this respect Russell stands as a great pillar of strength, of optimism. But his weakness is also an inheritance from the 19th century because it has left him completely unaware of the modern advances that have been made through researches in the social sciences. It is a great pity, I think, because Russell's titanic mind could have done so much with these ideas. The information is at hand; and if it could be applied and had a spokesman like Russell it would be a magnificent sight to witness.

IRVING: Do you think these broadcasts Russell has given show that he is afraid of science?

OWEN: I would like to take issue with both you and Carpenter, Irving, and take Russell's side on this question. I do not think either of you is doing justice to Russell. He certainly does not see applied science as the villain of the piece, as the cause of all our troubles.

If you will remember, he divides the areas of conflict into three—conflict with nature, conflict with our fellowmen, and conflict within ourselves, and makes it quite clear that in his view science has already, in principle, conquered nature and resolved the first conflict. And he, like all of us, must be grateful to science for having done that.

Now he says the real problem is the inner conflict within men's own souls, because it is this conflict that is projected out into our relationship with others, and causes quarrels and strife and war.

Now he asks the question: Can the same methods that conquered nature be used to overcome the inner conflict within man? His answer is No—and I agree with his answer, probably for different reasons. I do not exactly know why he answers No, but I think that, as you suggest, Irving, he is afraid of the application of scientific techniques to the human being. He is aware that sociological and psychological techniques can always be misused in relation to human beings. Such techniques can be used to break people down, to rebuild them, to condition them, to manipulate them, to mould them in accordance with the wishes of those in power—the kind of thing you see going on in our own country in various ways, and much more so in totalitarian countries.

That to me is an illustration of the fact that man tends to misuse and pervert all his great achievements, including scientific achievements. He perverts his scientific achievements in the atom bomb; he perverts them in the psychological conditioning of human behaviour.

I would put that down, again, to self-interest, the real villain of the piece.

Carpenter, what safeguards do you think science and the scientific method can provide against this misuse of scientific knowledge?

CARPENTER: I think it is best to keep in mind the fact that science has two aspects. On the one hand there is technical research within a given frame of reference which has long since been established, and on the other hand there are certain habits of mind connected with the scientific outlook, an enthusiasm for discovery, and, perhaps most important of all, certain values, above all, the idea that science is a tool or instrument which can only be used to further human happiness.

These two operations of science are usually bound up together. Actually, either might, and sometimes does, exist without the other. Witness what happened in Russian science, in Japan, and even in Canada and the United States. I think what Russell fears here is the death of the scientific outlook, more than the misuse of science.

But it is true science can be misused—just as any institution, scientific, secular or ecclesiastical, can misuse its power. But that does not mean that we should then turn our backs upon this new knowledge.

OWEN: Certainly not.

IRVING: I am interested in the fact that Russell does not have the same high regard for psychiatry and its possibilities that, say, Dr. Brock Chisholm has. There is an extraordinary discrepancy between the views of a great philosopher such as Russell and a leading psychiatrist such as Chisholm.

Chisholm seems to think that only as we apply psychiatry and certain aspects of psycho-analysis will it ever be possible to solve the problems of co-operation and competition with which we are faced. When Russell deals with the problems of co-operation and competition he takes quite a different line from Brock Chisholm. He sees those problems mainly on the economic level.

I wonder if Russell reflects here the influence of the experiment in socialism which has been undertaken in Great Britain in recent years. If we lack justice in a competitive society, I think that Russell is right in suggesting that no amount of psychiatry would help us to solve our problems. Is it true that we lack justice in a competitive society, and that we would not lack it in a co-operative society?

OWEN: I am interested in what you suggest about the quarrels which are taking place within the social sciences, so I will speak. But there is one group of the social scientists who is interested primarily in society and in the economic structure, and who imagines that all human ills can be solved if the social and economic fabric is perfected.

Another group of social scientists is interested in human beings and human nature, and thinks that if techniques of psychology were applied to eradicate neuroses and to build a healthy-minded type of individual, all our problems would be solved.

I had a student say to me the other day: "I take psychology and they tell me this and that and the other thing is the cause of our trouble; and I also take anthropology and they tell me this and that and the other thing—a set of different factors taken together—is the cause of all our trouble. How can I know, when each of these brands of social science has pretensions to be the saviour of mankind? What am I going to believe?"

What about this, Carpenter: Can the social sciences get together on this question?

CARPENTER: I do not think you are doing us justice, here. You will find considerable agreement on all basic points. It is true we disagree on minor things; but I think we are going to resolve this in time, and go on to other points. We are all agreed, for example, that there is no evidence whatsoever that one race, one ethnic group, is superior to another. There is no argument here.

We are all agreed, for example, that we can isolate certain psychopathological personalities. Witness the rise of the Nazi party. This phenomenon could have been identified easily. I do not mean that the entire problem of Fascism could have been resolved on this identification; but it certainly could have been helped.

No, I think you will find us at one on all basic issues. And in recent years there is not that same division which you suggest between the social sciences and psychology. We are not interested in man as an isolated individual. Man is a social being, and what differences may have originally existed between psychology and anthropology are gradually disappearing. The new field of research in culture and personality is developing from a synthesis of these two approaches.

IRVING: Coming back to Russell's views on co-operation and competition, how adequate is Russell's appreciation of the solution to this problem which is offered by the Soviet Union? Is it fair to say that Russell is too much of an individualist to appreciate the revolutionary experiment that has been undertaken in the Soviet Union?

Now, Russell seems to think that we will solve our problems by achieving what he calls social harmony. Lenin considered, following Marx, that the only way we could ever solve our problems would be by the revolutionary reconstruction of society at large. Would it be fair to say, Owen, that Russell's liberal individualism, which he inherits from the Victorian age, is a screen between him and a just appreciation of the Russian experiment?

OWEN: He is, I think, in many ways justly described as an individualist. This might be thought to bring him closer to Christianity with its stress on the repentance and redemption of the individual soul, and so on. Personally, I think that that kind of Christian individualism is a one-sided emphasis on part of the truth—the kind of thing you get in certain versions of

Christianity, notably in earlier forms of Protestantism. But there is an older strand of the Christian tradition which emphasizes the corporate life of man and the necessity of the individual to find his salvation within society. I think that Russell tends to overlook the problem of transforming society, the corporate life of man. The Communists have certainly stressed that aspect and, in my opinion, have gone to the opposite extreme.

IRVING: As we have said, Carpenter, for Russell the solution of the perplexities of the atomic age consists of the achieving of harmony. Would an anthropologist detect in that solution anything that is new or anything that is practical?

CARPENTER: Perhaps now new, but certainly practical. And I, personally, found his last lecture especially inspiring, that man must open his heart to joy and not remain in fear, which can only lead him to escape into the past, into mysticism. We know there is no solution there.

IRVING: One thing that disturbs me most about Russell has already been touched upon by Owen—Russell's stress on the individual, and his seeming neglect of the role of institutions in the reconstruction of humanity. What does the anthropologist think of Russell's stress on individualism?

CARPENTER: In a sense I suppose we would reject both the Marxist interpretation and that of Russell. Marxists—more specifically Stalinists—believe that by simply changing their institutions they could achieve this new world; they simply do not take into account the basic personality patterns of the people of the Soviet Union.

Russell, on the other hand, feels that a change in the individual alone is sufficient. I believe, on the contrary, that both institutions and the individual must be changed. I think this is Russell's weakest point, as a matter of fact. It comes out particularly in his earlier broadcasts, where he rejects the Marxist explanation and, in rejecting it completely, he also rejects the problem right down the line.

OWEN: That is the Christian position, too, I think.

IRVING: A Christian theologian would find something valuable in Russell's solution?

OWEN: Yes, the stress on the individual is necessary. But I think here Carpenter and I are in agreement. The per-

son and his community are correlative. They have to be understood and dealt with in terms of each other, not in isolation from each other. There is always danger of making one mistake or the other. There are a lot of other things in Russell that I mentioned at the outset that he derives from Christianity: his emphasis on the good of society, the good life, justice, and so on. His idea, that Carpenter has just mentioned, that the human heart must be open to joy and love and peace—those are the fruits of the spirit, in fact, the teaching of the New Testament.

IRVING: It is clear from this interesting discussion that Russell has valuable ideas to offer, even though he is an extreme controversialist. In his six broadcasts Russell gave us first an analysis of modern man's predicament and second certain proposals for the reconstruction of humanity. In this symposium we have discussed Russell's attitude to Christianity with specific reference to his conception of sin, his attitude to what he calls "obsolete ideas", his philosophy of values, and his conception of scientific method. We have commented also on his interpretation of individualism, his criticism of communism, and his proposals concerning cooperation and competition in the world of the future. Our discussion has shown that Russell has a distorted interpretation of Christianity, that he is largely a product of the age of J. S. Mill and T. H. Huxley in his emphasis on individualism, and that, while constantly stressing the scientific outlook, he has failed to appreciate the significance of the development of psychology and the social sciences during the last fifty years. If he is essentially an old-fashioned Victorian liberal, it is fair to say that his ethical ideals are largely derived from the Hebraic-Christian tradition. While his reiteration of impending doom reminds one of the Hebrew prophets, it also gives to his utterances a certain challenge and charm. We have tried to display both the strength and the weaknesses of Russell's basic philosophical ideas. It is to be hoped that our symposium will convince all thinking Canadians that there are more ways of dealing with Bertrand Russell than by denying him the privilege (as certain highly organized pressure groups have advocated) of being heard under the auspices of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Does not the greatest glory of our Canadian democracy consist in its ability freely to submit its most cherished beliefs and values to the crucible of public discussion?