
RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Bertrand Russell

"Confession and Concealment in *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell*" by Robert H. Bell, in *Biography* (Fall 1985), Dept. of English, Univ. of Hawaii, Honolulu, Hawaii 96822.

While visiting Beijing in 1921, Bertrand Russell fell gravely ill. "I was told that the Chinese said that they would bury me by the Western Lake and build a shrine to my memory," wrote Russell (1872-1970). "I have some slight regret that this did not happen, as I might have become a God, which would have been very *chic* for an atheist."

Despite Russell's claims to godlessness, Bell, who teaches English at Williams College, argues that *The Autobiography* of the logician and moral philosopher reveals a profoundly spiritual dimension. Russell was the father of Logical Atomism, a materialist view of nature that reduces life to scientific principles. Yet during his darkest hours Russell scrawled in his diary: "O God forgive me; I have sinned grievously."

Reared by his British Calvinist grandmother, Russell, by the age of 11, had chosen the certainties of mathematics over the uncertainties of religious faith. After graduating from Cambridge University, he taught philosophy and economics in the United States, Germany, and England. He wrote *German Social Democracy* (1896) and *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903). At the height of his early analytic work, he experienced a "mystical illumination" that transformed him into an ardent



Bertrand Russell in 1931. A professed atheist, he showed no patience with religious beliefs. He once remarked, to the dismay of clerics, that "the idea that the world is a unity is rubbish."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

pacifist. Twice he was imprisoned for antiwar protests (once during World War I and later during a 1961 nuclear disarmament sit-in).

After receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 1950, he turned almost completely to left-wing politics. He publicly condemned America's 1954 H-bomb tests, presided over the first meeting of scientists from the East and West at Pugwash, Nova Scotia, in 1957, and launched the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in 1958. During the mid-1960s, he led an International War Crimes Tribunal to castigate alleged U.S. atrocities in Vietnam.

But Russell—by then the author of more than 50 books, including *Authority and the Individual* (1949), *New Hopes for a Changing World* (1951), and *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (1959)—was plagued by a feeling of “desolate solitude.” His numerous philanderings and three marriages all failed. His theories of knowledge had fallen out of favor in the academic world.

“The sea, the stars, the night wind in waste places, mean more to me than even the human beings I love best,” Russell wrote in his diary. “I am conscious that human affection is to me at bottom an attempt to escape the vain search for God.”

Pulpit Politics

“Religion and Democracy” by A. James Reichley, in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* (Nov. 1985), 3533 Locust Walk, Philadelphia, Pa. 19104.

The growing participation by America's religious leaders in the nation's secular politics has provoked strong reactions among Americans—almost 90 percent of whom identify with some branch of the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Some would muzzle outspoken zealots; others would give them megaphones. For his part, Reichley, a Senior Brookings Fellow, argues that although religious values should permeate the world of politics, the leaders of America's churches and synagogues should be careful not to squander their moral authority.

On such secular quandaries as whether to support the Humphrey-Hawkins full employment bill of 1978, or to protest renewed American support for the International Monetary Fund in 1983, many religious leaders on the Left did not hesitate to voice their opinions publicly. Yet, observes Reichley, “they advocated policies that most competent economists predicted would produce effects opposite those intended, causing great harm to the poor.”

Similarly, many religious spokesmen on the Right opposed U.S. cession of the Panama Canal to Panama in 1977 and embraced Reaganomics, even when their judgments “had no clear relation to their theological or moral principles.”

No one can expect churches to shy away from the ethical issues inherent in abortion, civil rights, and nuclear war. To remain silent on these subjects is to lose credibility. Indeed, in some cases intervention