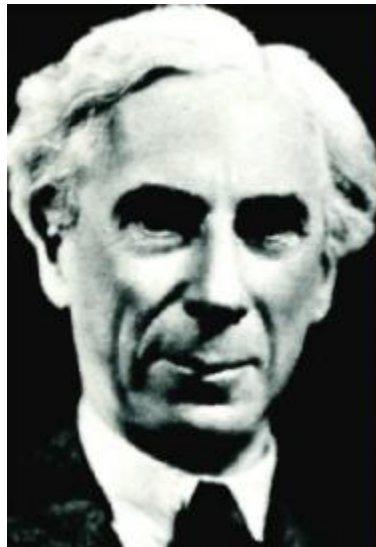


BERTRAND ARTHUR WILLIAM RUSSELL



As with his philosophical stance, Russell's positions on social issues developed as a reaction against extremes in his own experience. He believed that cruelty and an admiration for violence grew from inward or outward defects that were largely an outcome of what happened to people when they were very young. Pacifism could not be effected politically; a peaceful and happy world could not be achieved without deep changes in education. "I believe that nine out of ten who have had a conventional upbringing in their early years have become in some degree incapable of a decent and sane attitude toward marriage and sex generally."

His objections to religion were similarly based. What he tried to draw attention to was the destructiveness of accepting propositions on faith—in the absence of, or even in opposition to, evidence. "The important thing is not what you believe, but how you believe it." The person who bases his belief on reason will support it by argument and be ready to abandon the position if the argument fails. Belief based on faith concludes that argument is useless and resorts to "force either in the form of persecution or by stunting and distorting the minds of the young whenever [it] has the power to control their education."

If Russell's logic was not always unassailable, his life showed that ethical relativism could be combined with a passionate social conscience, and that passionate commitment could be stated without dogmatism. In his autobiography (3 vol., 1967–69) Russell summarized his personal philosophy by saying, "Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind."