

Aayan Hirsi Ali: Why I am now a Christian



Ayan Hirsi Ali writes in [UnHerd](#):

In 2002, I discovered a 1927 lecture by Bertrand Russell

entitled "Why I am Not a Christian". It did not cross my mind, as I read it, that one day, nearly a century after he delivered it to the South London branch of the National Secular Society, I would be compelled to write an essay with precisely the opposite title.

The year before, I had publicly condemned the terrorist attacks of the 19 men who had hijacked passenger jets and crashed them into the twin towers in New York. They had done it in the name of my religion, Islam. I was a Muslim then, although not a practising one. If I truly condemned their actions, then where did that leave me? The underlying principle that justified the attacks was religious, after all: the idea of Jihad or Holy War against the infidels. Was it possible for me, as for many members of the Muslim community, simply to distance myself from the action and its horrific results?

At the time, there were many eminent leaders in the West – politicians, scholars, journalists, and other experts – who insisted that the terrorists were motivated by reasons other than the ones they and their leader Osama Bin Laden had articulated so clearly. So Islam had an alibi.

This excuse-making was not only condescending towards Muslims. It also gave many Westerners a chance to retreat into denial. Blaming the errors of US foreign policy was easier than contemplating the possibility that we were confronted with a religious war. We have seen a similar tendency in the past five weeks, as millions of people sympathetic to the plight of Gazans seek to rationalise the October 7 terrorist attacks as a justified response to the policies of the Israeli government.

When I read Russell's lecture, I found my cognitive dissonance easing. It was a relief to adopt an attitude of scepticism towards religious doctrine, discard my faith in God and declare that no such entity existed. Best of all, I could

reject the existence of hell and the danger of everlasting punishment.

Russell's assertion that religion is based primarily on fear resonated with me. I had lived for too long in terror of all the gruesome punishments that awaited me. While I had abandoned all the rational reasons for believing in God, that irrational fear of hellfire still lingered. Russell's conclusion thus came as something of a relief: "When I die, I shall rot."

To understand why I became an atheist 20 years ago, you first need to understand the kind of Muslim I had been. I was a teenager when the Muslim Brotherhood penetrated my community in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985. I don't think I had even understood religious practice before the coming of the Brotherhood. I had endured the rituals of ablutions, prayers and fasting as tedious and pointless.

The preachers of the Muslim Brotherhood changed this. They articulated a direction: the straight path. A purpose: to work towards admission into Allah's paradise after death. A method: the Prophet's instruction manual of do's and don'ts – the *halal* and the *haram*. As a detailed supplement to the Qur'an, the *hadeeth* spelled out how to put into practice the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, God and the devil.

The Brotherhood preachers left nothing to the imagination. They gave us a choice. Strive to live by the Prophet's manual and reap the glorious rewards in the hereafter. On this earth, meanwhile, the greatest achievement possible was to die as a martyr for the sake of Allah.

The alternative, indulging in the pleasures of the world, was to earn Allah's wrath and be condemned to an eternal life in hellfire. Some of the "worldly pleasures" they were decrying included reading novels, listening to music, dancing, and

going to the cinema – all of which I was ashamed to admit that I adored.

The most striking quality of the Muslim Brotherhood was their ability to transform me and my fellow teenagers from passive believers into activists, almost overnight. We didn't just say things or pray for things: we *did* things. As girls we donned the burka and swore off Western fashion and make-up. The boys cultivated their facial hair to the greatest extent possible. They wore the white dress-like *tawb* worn in Arab countries or had their trousers shortened above their ankle bones. We operated in groups and volunteered our services in charity to the poor, the old, the disabled and the weak. We urged fellow Muslims to pray and demanded that non-Muslims convert to Islam.

During Islamic study sessions, we shared with the preacher in charge of the session our worries. For instance, what should we do about the friends we loved and felt loyal to but who refused to accept our *dawa* (invitation to the faith)? In response, we were reminded repeatedly about the clarity of the Prophet's instructions. We were told in no uncertain terms that we could not be loyal to Allah and Muhammad while also maintaining friendships and loyalty towards the unbelievers. If they explicitly rejected our summons to Islam, we were to hate and curse them.

Here, a special hatred was reserved for one subset of unbeliever: the Jew. We cursed the Jews multiple times a day and expressed horror, disgust and anger at the litany of offences he had allegedly committed. The Jew had betrayed our Prophet. He had occupied the Holy Mosque in Jerusalem. He continued to spread corruption of the heart, mind and soul.

You can see why, to someone who had been through such a religious schooling, atheism seemed so appealing. Bertrand Russell offered a simple, zero-cost escape from an unbearable life of self-denial and harassment of other people. For him,

there was no credible case for the existence of God. Religion, Russell argued, was rooted in fear: "Fear is the basis of the whole thing – fear of the mysterious, fear of defeat, fear of death."

As an atheist, I thought I would lose that fear. I also found an entirely new circle of friends, as different from the preachers of the Muslim Brotherhood as one could imagine. The more time I spent with them – people such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins – the more confident I felt that I had made the right choice. For the atheists were clever. They were also a great deal of fun.

So, what changed? Why do I call myself a Christian now?

Part of the answer is global. Western civilisation is under threat from three different but related forces: the resurgence of great-power authoritarianism and expansionism in the forms of the Chinese Communist Party and Vladimir Putin's Russia; the rise of global Islamism, which threatens to mobilise a vast population against the West; and the viral spread of woke ideology, which is eating into the moral fibre of the next generation.

We endeavour to fend off these threats with modern, secular tools: military, economic, diplomatic and technological efforts to defeat, bribe, persuade, appease or surveil. And yet, with every round of conflict, we find ourselves losing ground. We are either running out of money, with our national debt in the tens of trillions of dollars, or we are losing our lead in the technological race with China.

But we can't fight off these formidable forces unless we can answer the question: what is it that unites us? The response that "God is dead!" seems insufficient. So, too, does the attempt to find solace in "the rules-based liberal international order". The only credible answer, I believe, lies in our desire to uphold the legacy of the Judeo-Christian

tradition.

That legacy consists of an elaborate set of ideas and institutions designed to safeguard human life, freedom and dignity – from the nation state and the rule of law to the institutions of science, health and learning. As Tom Holland has shown in his marvellous book [Dominion](#), all sorts of apparently secular freedoms – of the market, of conscience and of the press – find their roots in Christianity.

And so I have come to realise that Russell and my atheist friends failed to see the wood for the trees. The wood is the civilisation built on the Judeo-Christian tradition; it is the story of the West, warts and all. Russell's critique of those contradictions in Christian doctrine is serious, but it is also too narrow in scope.

For instance, he gave his lecture in a room full of (former or at least doubting) Christians in a Christian country. Think about how unique that was nearly a century ago, and how rare it still is in non-Western civilisations. Could a Muslim philosopher stand before any audience in a Muslim country – then or now – and deliver a lecture with the title “Why I am not a Muslim”? In fact, [a book](#) with that title exists, written by an ex-Muslim. But the author published it in America under the pseudonym Ibn Warraq. It would have been too dangerous to do otherwise.

To me, this freedom of conscience and speech is perhaps the greatest benefit of Western civilisation. It does not come naturally to man. It is the product of centuries of debate within Jewish and Christian communities. It was these debates that advanced science and reason, diminished cruelty, suppressed superstitions, and built institutions to order and protect life, while guaranteeing freedom to as many people as possible. Unlike Islam, Christianity outgrew its dogmatic stage. It became increasingly clear that Christ's teaching implied not only a circumscribed role for religion as

something separate from politics. It also implied compassion for the sinner and humility for the believer.

Yet I would not be truthful if I attributed my embrace of Christianity solely to the realisation that atheism is too weak and divisive a doctrine to fortify us against our menacing foes. I have also turned to Christianity because I ultimately found life without any spiritual solace unendurable – indeed very nearly self-destructive. Atheism failed to answer a simple question: what is the meaning and purpose of life?

Russell and other activist atheists believed that with the rejection of God we would enter an age of reason and intelligent humanism. But the “God hole” – the void left by the retreat of the church – has merely been filled by a jumble of irrational quasi-religious dogma. The result is a world where modern cults prey on the dislocated masses, offering them spurious reasons for being and action – mostly by engaging in virtue-signalling theatre on behalf of a victimised minority or our supposedly doomed planet. The line often attributed to G.K. Chesterton has turned into a prophecy: “When men choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing, they then become capable of believing in anything.”

In this nihilistic vacuum, the challenge before us becomes civilisational. We can't withstand China, Russia and Iran if we can't explain to our populations why it matters that we do. We can't fight woke ideology if we can't defend the civilisation that it is determined to destroy. And we can't counter Islamism with purely secular tools. To win the hearts and minds of Muslims here in the West, we have to offer them something more than videos on TikTok.

The lesson I learned from my years with the Muslim Brotherhood was the power of a unifying story, embedded in the foundational texts of Islam, to attract, engage and mobilise

the Muslim masses. Unless we offer something as meaningful, I fear the erosion of our civilisation will continue. And fortunately, there is no need to look for some new-age concoction of medication and mindfulness. Christianity has it all.

That is why I no longer consider myself a Muslim apostate, but a lapsed atheist. Of course, I still have a great deal to learn about Christianity. I discover a little more at church each Sunday. But I have recognised, in my own long journey through a wilderness of fear and self-doubt, that there is a better way to manage the challenges of existence than either Islam or unbelief had to offer.