

Anecdote

*Bertrand Russell
&
Ralph Miliband*

The late Ralph Miliband had to work quite hard when interviewing Bertrand Russell at his home in Wales during the summer of 1967, but he nevertheless managed to extract some good stories, as this excerpt shows. It was originally published in the very first issue of The Spokesman, in 1970, shortly after Russell's death. The encounter was filmed for television by Terry de Lacey.

Miliband: Lord Russell, all your life you've been deeply concerned with ethics and morality. I'd like to ask you, have things moved your way in the last fifty years, say, in the field of sexual morality?

Russell: Oh, in the field of sexual morality they've moved my way enormously, much more than I should have thought it was possible for them to move, much more. There's a greater tolerance of the sort of thing that used to be regarded as wicked, and there's a much greater willingness to discuss sexual matters. For instance, take birth control. Now, my father lost an election through advocating birth control, not because birth control itself was particularly shocking, but because the subject of birth was shocking – you shouldn't mention it. Well, that's not the case any longer, and I find this a very, very great increase of freedom in the discussion of sexual matters.

Miliband: I have the impression that young people have really made their own revolution, so to speak.

Russell: Yes.

Miliband: And middle-aged or elderly people often tend to resent that revolution. Isn't that so?

Russell: Oh, certainly they do, they think to themselves 'Oh dear me, I wish I'd had these opinions when I was young'. And as they didn't, the opinions are held to be damnable. Yes, that's a very common attitude.

Miliband: What about attitudes to marriage?

Russell: Well, I think people are much more willing to accept divorce as a solution of marriage difficulties than they were. It used to be thought that if you hated each other that was a reason for forcing you to live together. But that view is passing, rather, now.

Miliband: You welcome what some people call the loosening of traditional morality.

Russell: I welcome it whole-heartedly, yes.

Miliband: But would you welcome any kind of loosening of traditional moralities, without reservation?

Russell: I don't know about any kind, no, not those about cruelty. I don't think people ought to get used to cruelty as an ordinary factor of life. There has to be, of course, protest against cruelty in politics, but there doesn't have to be imaginary cruelty: and to have the young brought up on imaginary cruelty, that's unnecessary, and, I think, bad.

Miliband: Do you think young people are luckier if not happier than they were fifty years ago?

Russell: Yes, I think so. I remember my youth, and I was absolutely tortured by sex, for which I had no outlet whatever.

Miliband: You were brought up strictly in that respect?

Russell: Very, very strictly indeed, yes. One mustn't mention any subject that was even remotely connected with sex. I remember we used to play the letter game sometimes, and one time I made the word 'chaste', and they all looked away, and they didn't mention that I'd made this word. It was an improper word.

Miliband: What was the basis of this attitude?

Russell: Oh, the basis was that sex was a nasty thing anyhow, and the less you said about it the better.

Miliband: What about attitudes to religion in the last fifty years? Have these gone your way?

Russell: Oh, not altogether, no. I think undergraduates were more free-thinking when I was young than they are now.

Miliband: Do you truly?

Russell: I rather think so, at least from what I hear of undergraduates; I don't know personally about it but they tell me that college chapels are now full, and they used not to be when I was young.

Miliband: And you deplore this?

Russell: I deplore it, yes.

Miliband: You have kept your rationalist and agnostic faith, so to speak, over the years?

Russell: Oh yes, I've never seen any reason to change it. I find it very odd, very odd, that when people talk about religion they never enquire whether it is true or not: they only make out that it's useful. Now I don't think a thing which is false can be useful, because it leads you astray. When I was a boy I started thinking about religion, and I looked to see whether there was any reason to suppose it true. I didn't bother about utility, because that seems to be a thing that follows on truth and not that precedes it.

Miliband: You've never been troubled, then, by religious conflicts and difficulties and doubts?

Russell: Well, I was as a boy, yes. I had some difficulty in freeing myself from the religion that I'd been taught.

Miliband: Mmm ... but you haven't been troubled by God since then?

Russell: Never since then, no. Oh no. Rather to my surprise, I found I was much happier when I ceased to believe in God than I had been before.

Miliband: And you have never thought of God since?

Russell: No, no. Well, I don't wish to be thought to have fallen into my anecdote, but God did remain, of course, as a figure of fiction, and in that sense he was quite important still. I had a dream once, oh, a long, long

time ago, now. It was that in the early morning I heard a tap at my front door, and I went down and there I found God, and He'd come to visit me. I recognised Him at once from His portraits, and so I thought, well, somebody had said that he conceived God nowadays as feeling Himself a little out of date, and rather old-fashioned; and so I felt I must be kind to Him, and not give Him the feeling that He was out of date, and so I talked to Him. We had a very pleasant conversation, and after this had proceeded for a certain length of time He began to think of going away again, and said: 'Well now, is there anything I can do for you?' I thought to myself, well, He's omnipotent, I suppose there are things he can do for me, and I said: 'Would you give me Noah's Ark?'. I thought I'd put it somewhere in the suburbs, and charge sixpence admission, and I should make a huge fortune: but His face fell, and He said: 'I'm very sorry, I can't do that for you, because I've already given it to an American friend of mine'.

Miliband: This is a true dream?

Russell: It was a true dream, yes, exactly as I dreamt it.

Miliband: And you haven't dreamt about God since?

Russell: Oh, I dream about God occasionally, yes.

Miliband: You have often said that religion was not only dogmatic but also cruel, that it was a cruel imposition upon the human spirit: isn't that right?

Russell: That's right, and I'll illustrate it by a story. There was a Scottish minister who was always trying to induce his congregation to repent and to become good. But he had very, very little success, I regret to say! They went on in their sinful ways, in spite of all he could say to them, until one Saturday night he had a dream. When Sunday morning came he thought, now this dream will make a good subject for my sermon; for in his dream he dreamt that he was in Heaven, and looking over the wall of Heaven he could see, down below, all his parishioners writhing in agony, and they said 'Oh Lord, we didna ken, we didna ken!' and the Lord in His infinite mercy said 'Weel, ye ken the noo'.

Well, that illustrates the cruelty ...

Miliband: People often say that religion may indeed be untrue or cruel but that none the less men need a faith to live by. Would you endorse that sort of view?

Russell: No, certainly not, that's perfect nonsense. Why, the Chinese haven't had any religious faith since the eleventh century and they've got on perfectly well, and they're the most cheerful race on earth.

Miliband: What about secular faith? Do men need a secular faith, a set of beliefs which they hold?

Russell: No, I think people are always saying that such beliefs are useful: but they're not, because beliefs become dogmatic, and the moment they become dogmatic they do harm.

Miliband: Now may I take you back to your upbringing. You said your upbringing was very, very strict. What is the duty of parents to their children?

Russell: Oh, I think their duty is to give them plenty of food and as much education as they can stand and let them go their own way.

Miliband: And should they try to prevent them from actions which may not conform to accepted patterns?

Russell: I think they should try to prevent them from cruel actions, yes. I mean, I should be inclined to reproach a child of mine if I saw him picking a fly's wings to pieces, or if I saw him indulging in more serious forms of cruelty. But that's my only thing.

Miliband: Cruelty is really what you would try to forbid: otherwise, you would want freedom?

Russell: Freedom except for a certain amount of education, but not, not very much more than the child wants. I mean some children like being educated and some don't. The latter are the majority, and I think a child should have as much education as he wants.

Miliband: Now, assume man in a society that would be free from war and possibly free from want: assume that, and what is the meaning of true freedom? What is a free man in such a society?

Russell: The free man in such a society would pursue both for himself and for others whatever course he thought would be most likely to promote

happiness. He wouldn't have any taboos against any form of happiness that didn't involve cruelty. I think, if he were contented with his own life, he would be likely to be kindly and to wish other people to have a good life, too. I should like to get rid of all mass hatreds. To have one mass thinking one thing and another mass thinking another so that they hate each other and they fight: it's sad, because it's perfectly certain that both sides are mistaken in what they believe.

Miliband: But then, what about the devils inside? Are there such devils inside one?

Russell: Oh, yes, there are in some people, certainly. I don't think that you can get rid of insanity, for instance. I think that however good a state you have there will be people who are homicidal maniacs and they will have to be restrained.

Miliband: But you have often spoken of a lust for power, or vanity, as a fundamental category. Are these 'devils'?

Russell: I think that when they become devilish it's generally due to some oppression that a person has suffered, generally when young. If you bring up a person in a very, very oppressive atmosphere, and then let him loose, he'll probably be rather a bad lot.

Miliband: You were really an adult when Freud really began his work.

Russell: Yes.

Miliband: Lord Russell – since then Freud has become one of the major names of the twentieth century, one of the very few major names of the twentieth century. Have you been influenced by Freudian ideas?

Russell: I've been a bit influenced, yes. Not, I think, by the detail of Freud: but I've been influenced by the belief that most people's beliefs are irrational and are based on irrationality. Sometimes they come from fear of death, while sometimes they come from sexual sources, but I think Freud exaggerates the part of sex.

Miliband: But isn't there a contradiction between your insistence on today's irrationality and tomorrow's rationality? Where is the bridge?

Russell: Oh, I think the bridge is partly through education and partly by creating a world in which there are not great terrors. I think if people live in terror it has a dreadful effect on them. And people always have lived in terror ever since they ceased to be beasts.

Miliband: And in some ways they live in graver terror now than they have in the past.

Russell: Yes.

Miliband: At the risk of nuclear holocaust, and so on.

Russell: Well, I don't know whether the terror is greater, because most people don't realise the nature of the nuclear peril, not actively, whereas they did appreciate wild beasts. I mean, in the days when men had no protection against wild beasts, they must have lived in constant terror, in the way birds do.

Miliband: What about manufactured irrationality in the press and the mass media?

Russell: Yes, well, that's very bad, but I think it's easy for us who are pre-occupied with it to think that it has a larger share in people's minds than it does have. If it had a larger share I think they'd get rid of it.

Miliband: Lord Russell, you have witnessed scientific developments of an extraordinary magnitude in your time. About some of these one needn't even ask a question, since they are clearly positive and fruitful: but all in all would you say, is this going in the way you would wish, the development of scientific knowledge?

Russell: Well, yes, except in the matters of armaments. The scientists who invented the things that are now so destructive didn't think in those terms, they were not originally thinking of armaments at all. They were perfectly innocent men. I think we can get rid of the bad results of science and keep only the good.

Miliband: Are you excited by space exploration and the like?

Russell: Not the least. No, I think it's a tiresome thing. I don't like it.

Miliband: Do you not?

Russell: No.

Miliband: Why not, sir?

Russell: Oh, I don't know, it's a sort of cosmic impiety. I like to think of the moon not being troubled by our troubles.

Miliband: And Mars, and Venus, and ...

Russell: Yes ... I like to think that they all go happily about their business and don't bother with us.

Miliband: You wouldn't put this in the department of the search for truth?

Russell: Oh no, no.

Miliband: The thirst for knowledge?

Russell: It is ... just fantasy.

Miliband: Well, it's all too real, the space laboratories are being put up in the air: the projectiles in space are all too real, are they not?

Russell: Yes, yes, they will ruin the solar system, but I think it will be a good long time before they can ruin the world outside the solar system.

Miliband: Some years ago you were appealing to scientists of all nations to take up the burden of protest against war. Do you still think that a scientist, as a citizen, or as a member of a nation state, can make a difference in affairs?

Russell: Yes, they have made some difference. The Pugwash Movement is one example you're thinking of. It's achieved certain things. It's achieved, for instance, the Test Ban Treaty.

Miliband: Yes.

Russell: Certainly there is room for that sort of movement.

Miliband: Yes. Now, leaving state technology out of this, some people have very marked hesitation in applauding technical and technological developments and yearn for the simple life, or look back with nostalgia upon the simple life. What is your attitude to this?

Russell: Oh no, I don't recognise that as a sensible attitude. I think where knowledge can produce happiness one should accept it, and most scientific knowledge is capable of producing happiness. It should be welcomed in so far as it does.

Miliband: You have no qualms about the development of scientific, technological potentialities?

Russell: No, no serious qualms, no, no. I think of science, the more of it the better.

Miliband: But not, you say, space science?

Russell: Oh yes, I think it's quite all right to have space science. Only it doesn't have to appeal to me.

Miliband: What about this whole process of ageing? You have said something on your eightieth birthday, I recall, on the process of ageing. Now, all these years on ...

Russell: Well, yes, I've been a very old man all that time and I haven't, as far as I can see, changed much. It's been on the whole the happiest time of my life.

Miliband: Really.

Russell: Yes. Chiefly because I've been happily married.

Miliband: But people fear age, ageing.

Russell: Well, I *feel* ageing physically. I mean, for instance, that I have much more difficulty in climbing over a gate than I used to have.

Miliband: But what of this fear of age?

Russell: That, I think, is foolish.

Miliband: You do?

Russell: I mean, one's known all one's life that one was mortal, and there's no point in being frightened about it.

Miliband: But knowledge is not reconciliation. One may know but one need not be reconciled. How come that you are so wisely reconciled to old age?

Russell: Well, I suppose because I still have plenty of activities open to me. If I couldn't do any work I think I should mind, but, as long as I can ...

Miliband: The secret is activity, in other words?

Russell: Yes, I think it better if you can keep up your activity. Of course, now on the continent of Europe, one sees American businessmen, elderly businessmen who've retired, and who go with their wives to see sights. Their wives are interested in the sights and the men are not in the least interested and they're perfectly miserable because they can't do anything: but if you can carry on activity, I think that it's all right.

I stand by what I wrote some years ago now, about old age. I would like to read it to you because it expresses exactly what I still think:

'I believe that when I die I shall rot and nothing of my ego will survive. I am not young and I love life but I should scorn to shiver with terror at the thought of annihilation. Happiness is nonetheless true happiness because it must come to an end. Nor do thoughts and love lose their values because they are not everlasting.'

Miliband: I think it's true to say that people who grow very old tend sometimes to seek new meaning in God, or in some belief in after-life, or find it very difficult to reconcile themselves to the notion of death as a final end. You haven't been touched by this at all?

Russell: No, not in the least. I used to say, when Shaw was very old, 'What keeps him alive is controversy'. And I think that's what keeps me alive. If everybody came to agree with me I expect I should die off.

Miliband: I don't think there is too much danger of that, Lord Russell. You will very happily be with us for many, many years on the basis of people's disagreements with your views.