

Irreligious fundamentalism

by Stefan Andersson

Al Seckel, ed. *Bertrand Russell on God and Religion*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1986. Pp. 350. c\$17.95, paper.

THIS IS A new collection of twenty-one of Bertrand Russell's writings on religion and related topics. The editor, Al Seckel, who is a member of the Bertrand Russell Society, is portrayed in the *Russell Society News* (no. 53 [Feb: 1987]: 12–13) as a zealous apostle of Russell and a crusader against the same kind of superstitious nonsense that Russell combated.

The editor has supplied the book with a preface, a twenty-page essay called "The Life and Wisdom of Bertrand Russell", an index of names, and a subject index. That the editor is not always as well informed about his subject as he is enthusiastic about it, is exemplified as soon as the "Acknowledgments". There he says that the Bertrand Russell Archives are located in Toronto, which of course might have been a good idea, since I am staying there, but certainly is not the case as everyone knows who has visited them on the third floor in Mills Memorial Library at McMaster University in Hamilton. It is not difficult to find other mistakes and misleading statements in the preface and the essay.¹

However, it is what the editor does *not say* that makes his contributions disappointing. He does not say why he chose the writings he did instead of other possible ones. The volume is divided into five parts without any explanation and without any intelligible principle behind it. What is perhaps more important for a potential buyer of the book is that he does not say which of these twenty-one writings can still be found in Russell's own books or in similar editions of Russell's writings. As a matter of fact, the only piece that was not republished by Russell or did not appear in an edition of Russell's writings is an eleven-page article on Mahatma Gandhi which contains very little of Russell's views on God and religion. When different versions of an essay exist, he does not say where other versions are to be found and, consequently, why he chose the one he did.² What is to be read on the back cover—that "Al Seckel has rescued many of Russell's best essays on religion, free thought, and rationalism from their resting places in obscure pamphlets, hard-to-find books, and

out-of-print periodicals to form a superb compilation"—is a good example of a misleading advertisement. For scholarly purposes the book is not recommendable, and there is, therefore, no reason to go deeper into textual problems.

The question is whether the book is still worth buying, if one already has one or more of the collections of Russell's writings that have already been published. Compared to *Atheism: Collected Essays 1943–49* (New York: Arno, 1972) and *An Atheist's Bertrand Russell* (Austin: American Atheist Press, 1980), Al Seckel's book gives the reader many of the same writings plus several other items. But assume that the potential buyer already is the happy owner of *Why I Am Not a Christian*, edited by Paul Edwards, published for the first time in 1957, and *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, edited by Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Denonn, published in 1961. Is it then worthwhile to buy Seckel's book? If you compare what you already have with what you will get, it turns out that you have "A Free Man's Worship", which Seckel for some reason has not included, and you also have "The Essence of Religion", "Why I Am Not a Christian", the debate between Russell and Father Copleston, and "What Is an Agnostic?" These four papers duplicate Seckel's selections, and altogether it turns out that of the 300 pages in his compilation, you already have almost half of them. The question is now whether the other 180 pages are worth the price. There are no surprises waiting for you, but on the other hand what you get is good stuff, although not all of it is about God and religion.

From a scholarly point of view the book is of little value, but it is convenient to have so many of Russell's writings on religion in one volume. On the whole, the book does no harm, and might encourage people to read Russell. In that case I am all for it.

*Department of Philosophy and Religion
Faculty of Theology
Lund University*

¹ E.g., when he claims that the book that Russell's father wrote on religion—*An Analysis of Religious Belief*—"was to have a profound effect on young Bertrand" (p. 15). The problem with this claim is that it lacks documentary support. If Seckel could supply support for his claim, it would be an interesting discovery overlooked by other scholars interested in Russell and his views on religion.

² E.g., "Religion and the Churches", which appeared for the first time in *The Unpopular Review* but to which Russell made some changes when he included it as a chapter of *Principles of Social Reconstruction*.