

Bibliographies/archival inventories

A secondary bibliography of Russell's "The Essence of Religion"

by *Kenneth Blackwell*

"HE FELT I had been a traitor to the gospel of exactness" was how Russell reported Wittgenstein's view of "The Essence of Religion" to Lady Ottoline Morrell. There was more to Russell's report: he had "wantonly used words vaguely; also that such things are too intimate for print. I minded very much, because I half agree with him" (letter #600, postmarked 11 Oct. 1912). Yet Wittgenstein's reception of the essay was atypical at the time. "The Essence of Religion" was salvaged from a longer work on Russell's ethics and philosophy of religion, known in the correspondence as "Prisons" and published in *The Hibbert Journal*, 11 (Oct. 1912): 46-62; it is reprinted in *The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell* (1961). "The Essence" drew a number of other responses, most of them filled with interest at what this mathematical logician had to say about questions of ultimate value. In letters 617-24 to Lady Ottoline he reported the responses of Sir Francis Younghusband, James Ward and his wife, and G. M. Trevelyan (who had been a great admirer of "The Free Man's Worship"), as well as his intended guardian, T. J. Cobden-Sanderson, and the great Indian poet then visiting Cambridge, Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore's letter of appreciation, dated 13 October and which is printed in Volume 1 of Russell's *Autobiography* (1967), draws affinities between eastern philosophy and Russell's doctrine of release from the bonds of the narrow self.

The public response began with a paper delivered to The Heretics at Cambridge. From McMaster's acquisition of C. K. Ogden's files on the Heretics, we know that the paper was given on 20 October 1912 by J. H. Burn. (I have listed it in the bibliography because there is hope a copy of the paper will turn up and be published.) A few days later Russell hosted

a number of the Heretics and discussed “The Essence” with them.

The same month “The Essence” was reviewed anonymously in *The Nation*. Russell did not like the review, telling Lady Ottoline that it “has the impertinence to accuse me of bad logic. The writer has a tincture of Hegelianism—he thinks the world is an organic unity, and nothing is really different from anything else. I haven’t the least idea who he is” (letter 613). A. S. Pringle–Pattison then made “The Essence” a topic of discussion in his 1912–13 Gifford Lectures, which were published as *The Idea of God in the Light of Recent Philosophy* (1917). However, he did not include the lecture on Russell in this book, referring obliquely to it in the preface as not of “sufficient permanent importance”. Possibly Russell’s opposition to the war and the fact that the book is dedicated to Pringle–Pattison’s son (who was killed in the war) were also factors. G. H. Hardy’s paper was read—presumably to the Apostles, of which both he and Russell were members—about 3 February 1913. Russell told Lady Ottoline that he “must hear it”. One would give a lot for a transcript of the discussion that probably followed, for Hardy’s paper is a highly critical response to “The Essence” from a mind that Russell described as “amazing and aesthetically delightful” (letter 919). The last of the immediate responses to “The Essence” came from R. F. Alfred Hoernlé, of whom Russell had been a colleague in the Harvard philosophy department in 1914.

Russell’s own response in later years was to ignore the paper. I know of no reference to it beyond his writing to Lady Ottoline c.1916, when he was revising the contents of *Philosophical Essays for Mysticism and Logic*: “I don’t want to reprint my article on Religion in the *Hibbert*—I don’t think it good enough” (letter 1237). Despite the interest shown by the critics who liked the article, it would appear that Wittgenstein’s views were the most influential on Russell.

In addition to the items listed below, there is an article that should be read for any wider study of what might be called Russell’s positive philosophy of religion—by which I mean his attempt to set out his fundamental normative ethic of so enlarging the scope or “impersonality” of our desires that their satisfactions become compossible. Something of this ethic can be found in the last chapter of *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), and the article that discusses this chapter is John King-Farlow’s “Self-Enlargement and Union: Neglected Passages of Russell and Some Famous Ones of Proust”, *Theoria to Theory*, 11 (August 1977): 105–15. Although this series of secondary bibliographies excludes dissertations, one early thesis deserves mention: Rees Higgs Bowen’s “A Constructive Study of the Religious Philosophies of S. Alexander, L. T. Hobhouse, and Bertrand Russell” (unpublished PH.D.

dissertation, Yale University, 1924).

Any additions to this bibliography will be gratefully received.

1912

J. H. BURN, “The Religion of Mr. Bertrand Russell”. A paper read to The Heretics, Cambridge, on 20 Oct. 1912.

ANON., “Religion without God”, *The Nation*, London, 12 (27 Oct. 1912): 171–2.

1913

A. S. PRINGLE-PATTISON, “‘The Free Man’s Worship’: A Consideration of Mr. Bertrand Russell’s Views on Religion”, *The Hibbert Journal*, 12 (Oct. 1913–14): 47–63.

1916

R. F. ALFRED HOERNLÉ, “The Religious Aspect of Bertrand Russell’s Philosophy”, *Harvard Theological Review*, 9 (Apr. 1916): 157–89.

1917

G. H. HARDY, “Mr. Russell as a Religious Teacher”, *The Cambridge Magazine*, 6 (19–26 May 1917): 624–6, 650–3. Read (to the Apostles?) c.3 Feb. 1913. Read again at Cambridge (to the Heretics) in December 1915. Reprinted in *Russell*, n.s. 1, no. 2 (Winter 1981): 119–35.

1937

E. INGRAM WATKIN, *Men and Tendencies* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1937), “Lord Russell: Religion without Reason”, pp. 49–92. (This chapter is frequently, though not wholly, concerned with “The Essence”. Jager 1976 recommends another piece by Watkin on Russell’s philosophy of religion: “Bertrand Russell—Religious Atheist”, *Catholic World*, 116 [March 1923]: 731–42. It does not, however, refer to “The Essence”.)

1944

EDGAR SHEFFIELD BRIGHTMAN, “Russell’s Philosophy of Religion”, in P. A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, The Library of

Living Philosophers, vol. 5 (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University, 1944), pp. 539-56. (Russell responded to this paper in his "Reply to Criticisms" in this volume.)

1972

RONALD JAGER, *The Development of Bertrand Russell's Philosophy* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), Chap. 10, "Ethics and Religion", esp. 492-5.

1975

JACK PITT, "Russell on Religion", *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 6 (Spring 1975): 40-53.

1976

RONALD JAGER, "Russell and Religion", in J. E. Thomas and Kenneth Blackwell, eds., *Russell in Review* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens, Hacker, 1976), pp. 91-113. (A necessary reading for the philosophical background of "The Essence"; Jager calls the essay "the most neglected, I think, of all his really first-rate essays" [p. 94].)