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## A SURVEY OF FREE THOUGHT

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Paul Edwards. *God and the Philosophers*. Edited by Timothy J. Madigan. New York: Prometheus Books, 2009. Pp. 330. ISBN 978-1-59102-618-1 (hb). US\$28.98.

Paul Edwards (1923–2004) is most famous as the editor of the magisterial *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. He was one of three coauthors of its lengthy entry on Bertrand Russell. In 1957, Edwards also edited Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*. A collection of his writings entitled *God and the Philosophers* has been recently published, edited by Tim Madigan.

Timothy Madigan is a previous editor of *Free Inquiry* who would visit Edwards when travelling to New York City and who had the privilege over the years of reading several drafts of *God and the Philosophers*, which Edwards knew would be his final project (p. 8).

Madigan explains: "Never one to hide his own unbelief, Edwards often commented that his two main goals were to demolish the influence of Heidegger and keep alive the memory of William Reich, the much-reviled psychoanalyst whose critiques of religion Edwards felt still remained valid" (p. 10).

*God and the Philosophers* is probably best appreciated as a very readable survey that is basically a patchwork of Edwards' various musings on some of the West's more iconoclastic philosophers. The work is not a systematic compendium and is probably of most value to those inclined to free thought and making their initial forays into the history of philosophy.

The order in which Edwards discusses the thinkers is chronological, but his method of selection is idiosyncratic, especially in the earlier chapters. It is unclear why medieval figures like Maimonides and Aquinas are *included* in this collection and great ancient independent thinkers like Xenophanes of Colophon and Strato of Lampsacus are *excluded*. In any case, Edwards nowhere explains his criteria, or method, for selecting the thinkers he discusses.

Edwards credits Russell with being "probably the most influential unbeliever of the twentieth century" (p. 253). And the personal influence of Russell on Edwards is clear from Edwards' mention that, while he himself was already "moving in the direction of unbelief", reading three of Russell's critiques of religion "fixed me for good" (p. 253).

Not only does Edwards devote an entire chapter to Russell but he cites him

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throughout the book. In the chapter on Hume, Edwards presents the *Natural History of Religion*'s observation of "religionists'" insecurity regarding their own beliefs as corresponding to Russell's view that "believers hate and persecute their critics because they dimly realize that their own beliefs are myths" (p. 96). Edwards takes both Schopenhauer (p. 179) and Spencer (p. 242) to task for assuming that something has no value if it is not permanent and, on both occasions, credits Russell with having a superior rival view.

The one occasion where Russell evidently stuns Edwards as being more in the camp of the believers rather than the non-believers is Russell's discussion of Spinoza's equation of a mind *conceiving* something "under a form" of eternity with that mind *being* eternal. As Edwards sees it, Russell was "apparently under such a spell of Spinoza that he [Russell] reports this view without one word of dissent. My own dissent is very simple: if consciousness cannot exist without the body, no part of it can survive and be filled with 'eternal thoughts' of God or Nature or anything else" (p. 37).

Perhaps Edwards' most poignant invocation of Russell is at the close of the chapter on Nietzsche. After detailing the "romantic cult of war" and "transition to modern totalitarianism" as among Nietzsche's legacies, Edwards illustrates the moral high ground with which German and Austrian establishmentarians could counter contrarian claims that "God is dead", whereas "[i]n Anglo-Saxon countries intelligent adolescents have the great fortune of having Bertrand Russell as their guide to unbelief minus the superman" (p. 233).

My biggest disappointment with the book is Edwards' silence concerning his own involvement in editing Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian*. This is not only because it would have been an ideal opportunity to provide such information but also because Edwards' edition of *Why I Am Not a Christian* was the first book of Russell's read by the present reviewer and the one that helped "fix" him.

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