

## Wittgenstein, Russell, and Religion

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**Jacques Bouveresse has written a book on religion in the thought of Russell and Wittgenstein. While the position of the atheist Russell on religion's obscurities is clear, Wittgenstein's is far more difficult to elucidate.**

Reviewed: Jacques Bouveresse, *Que peut-on faire de la religion ?*, followed by two previously unpublished fragments from Wittgenstein presented by Ilse Somavilla and translated by Françoise Stonborough. Agone, Collection Banc d'essais. 2011, 190 p., 19 €.

Upon finishing Jacques Bouveresse's book (which is accompanied by two previously unpublished fragments by Wittgenstein presented by Ilse Somavilla), one might conclude that its title—"What can one do with religion?"—has little to do with its actual subject matter. Most if not quite all of the book is devoted to determining what Russell and Wittgenstein actually said about religion. Why then should one adopt an attitude of indeterminacy towards religion, if the point of the book is simply to present two clearly defined historical positions? Yet as the reader suspects, Bouveresse is not interested solely in reconstructing two philosophers' views about religious belief. He wants to know how those of us who live in democratic and pluralistic societies should respond to religion when it grows intolerant—once again. The real reason Bouveresse has chosen to examine Russell and Wittgenstein's religious views is to explain how we should react to believers seek to foist their religious certainties upon the public sphere. What then do these two thinkers have to tell us about religion's value and its proper place in public life?

By the end of the book, readers will be convinced they understand Russell's position; on the other hand, exactly what Wittgenstein thought about religion is hard to say, given his contradictory writings and attitudes on the topic. The difference is obvious even if one asks the simple question: did they believe in god? Throughout the book, Bouveresse leaves little doubt that Russell was an atheist. Yet while this cannot be said of Wittgenstein, it would be wrong to conclude that he was a believer or an agnostic. I will not hide the fact that despite Bouveresse's

effort to clarify Wittgenstein's stance, it remains deeply tentative and highly ambiguous. Let us first consider what the book tells us about how Russell viewed religion.

### **Russell: Religion's So-Called Insights Are Deeply Obscure**

Russell's position, which is essentially rationalistic and a continuation of the Enlightenment tradition, is rooted in the idea that the only beliefs one can hold as true are those that can be justified with sound reasons. This rule, drawn from Clifford's intellectual ethics<sup>1</sup>, leads Russell first to assess religious beliefs in terms of their truth (as one should with any belief) and, second, to declare that, on the basis of this requirement, the beliefs in question are unacceptable. Russell not only opposed religion (a category in which he included the ideologies of Communism and Nazism<sup>2</sup>) because of its unjustified dogmas, but also due to the countless harm caused by religious obscurantism and intolerance. Religion, in short, is both false and dangerous. Yet while Russell completely discounts religion's purported cognitive content, he does believe one can distinguish between dogma and the legitimate values that religion can instill. Consequently, Russell ties religion not only to fear, vanity, and hatred (the expression of which it encourages), but also to such valuable dispositions as reverence, acceptance, and love. These values, of course, are not inherently religious; they seem religious just because human nature is disposed towards altruistic emotions, such as pity. Even so, these emotions, however natural their origins may be, dissuade us from excessive regard for our own egos, improving our ability to understand other people and the world, which can assist the pursuit of scientific research and, more generally, inspire the quest for the truth.

Does Jacques Bouveresse adopt Russell's position on religion? As a general rule, it is never easy, in Bouveresse's books, to distinguish between his beliefs and **those of** the authors he examines. Yet Bouveresse clearly accepts Russell's claim that, in matters of belief, it is imperative to prefer intellect to sentiment. This is why he claims, against those who would object to their beliefs being challenged on the grounds that their feelings are entitled to respect, that unless we are free to put other people's opinions at risk, there can be no true freedom of thought (as I see it, his position on that point is the same as Ruwen Ogien's in *La liberté d'offenser* [Freedom to Offend], La Musardine 2007).

Furthermore, Bouveresse clearly approves the distinction Russell makes between beliefs that are justified by their truth and beliefs that are justified by their utility. Consistent with the position he

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Ethics of Belief*, the late nineteenth-century British philosopher William K. Clifford maintained that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." *Lectures and Essays*, New York, Macmillan, 1901.

<sup>2</sup> "For his part, Russell sees no reason why profane philosophies and ideologies that practice what might be called 'algodicy' (the justification of suffering) and strive for a supreme and detached position that would allow them to find reasons for justifying suffering and evil should be treated with more respect than religion" (p. 64).

defends in his earlier work, Bouveresse does not want to “dumb down” scientific knowledge, as doing so would amount to reducing science to a human, all too human vision of reality. Moreover, Bouveresse implies that while science could still make advances even if its status was downgraded to that of a purely human narrative, such unilateral revisionism (whether on the part of scientists or public opinion) would encourage religion to become even more dogmatic and intolerant, since, for religious faiths, adopting a comparable position would be suicidal. Contrary to science, they would have qualified none of their epistemological pretensions. Bouveresse thus seeks to preserve Russell’s distinction between scientifically legitimate beliefs and other beliefs. On this point, it is worth noting that Bouveresse does not separate the value of truth from the value of freedom. Indeed, if truth were disqualified and relativized to the point that it ceased to provide authentic knowledge of reality, one would lose, with the ability to describe them truthfully, the possibility of identifying regimes that restrict freedom and of characterizing as dictatorships states that, for sound epistemological reasons, deserve to be called as such. Bouveresse is nevertheless conscious of the fact—and on this issue he identifies with the Nietzschean tradition—that the rationalistic critique of religious beliefs in which Russell placed so much stock can only be effective if beliefs are the outcome of cognitive inquiry. If beliefs are only the result of human psychological needs, invalidating them intellectually would take away none of their power.

### **Wittgenstein: Is Religion Light or Heat?**

How does Wittgenstein’s position on religion differ from Russell’s? First, unlike Russell, his relationship to religion is neither completely external, nor purely epistemological. Nor can he be described as a typical believer, who holds specific dogmas to be true and defends his church, any more than he was a philosopher whose thought belonged to a recognizable religious tradition. Wittgenstein denounces those who purport to have air-tight proofs that can justify religion (which thinkers like Leibniz considered essential), just as he disagrees with those, like Russell, who think that, given the lack of such proofs, any kind of religious belief must be completely discounted. According to the former, believers should be considered reasonable, whereas if one accepts the latter’s criteria, they should be seen as irrational. Yet for Wittgenstein, both sides err in placing religious beliefs on the same plane as conclusions derived from proofs (whether these be empirical or rational is irrelevant), when in fact, since science is silent on such questions, they can be considered as true only insofar as they represent the choice of a particular form of life—a practice or a way of seeing, acting, and orienting oneself in the world that gives life meaning. Indeed, Wittgenstein is very straightforward about the element of committed and passionate risk that such a choice requires. In light of this aspect of Wittgenstein’s thought, Bouveresse seems to recognize how we might re-enchant our world by infusing it with an enthusiastic orientation that science cannot offer. But it also calls attention to the fact that Wittgenstein believed that such a personal religious commitment was only possible within a specific historical context—one that is now gone for good and which has given way to a world in which, alas, science is now regarded

as sacred. If we ignore the connection between religious belief and historical background, we will completely misconstrue the possibility that religion could “come back”: without such a context, such a return could only be a posture or meaningless show.

Wittgenstein did, however—and how different he is in this respect from Russell!—see Soviet Communism as something that, in his own day, could lead men to commit themselves passionately to a new and exalted world. Yet what about Nazism, communism’s contemporary rival? Seen in this light, would it not share communism’s positive character? Bouveresse makes it clear that the Austrian philosopher did not judge political movements solely on their ability to mobilize, convert, and change the way one lives. He also tied their efficacy to the beliefs their discourse articulates. From this perspective, fascism and Nazism are empty and pompous—“bloated,” as Wittgenstein puts it.

Thus it is clear that Wittgenstein saw passionate commitment, whether in politics or religion, as connected to meaning, even as he insisted on the fact that the meaningful beliefs in question could not be reduced to true, verified, and scientific propositions. In this way, Bouveresse poses the key problem of Wittgenstein’s position: what can it mean, from a Wittgensteinian standpoint, to have meaningful religious beliefs (as opposed to empty, shallow, or crazy ones) if these beliefs are inherently irreducible to epistemological categories (true/false, justifiable/unjustifiable)? What is the status of these religious thoughts, which Wittgenstein never explicitly reduces to mere usefulness for life, even as he refuses to consider them as “true”? On this point, Wittgenstein’s thought is, I believe, essentially ambiguous. It is thus hardly surprising that Bouveresse himself is unable to fully clarify the problem.

### **A Platonic Text by Wittgenstein**

One of the two previously unpublished texts included in the book, with introductions and commentary by Ilse Somavilla, clearly endorses the view of religion as enlightened knowledge. This fragment from a 1925 letter, entitled “The Man in the Red Glass Bell,” invariably echoes Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, as Somavilla observes (p. 177). Granted, it refers to the equivalent not of one cave, but many. Wittgenstein imagines human beings living in isolated groups, each of which is enclosed in a space that is illuminated by an outer white light which shines through the colored glass that traces the limits of their world. For Wittgenstein, these spaces basking in their own distinctive colors refer to particular cultures and the colored light to their distinctive ideals. As for the external white light, it represents spiritual and religious illumination in its purest state. In such a context, one finds four different kinds of human beings: those who are unaware that they live within a confined space; those who are aware but stay put (as a result of which they adopt either a humorous or melancholy attitude), those who manage to leave their culture (who become religious); and those who leave but choose to return to their colored bubbles. What interests Wittgenstein is less whether people live inside or outside than the intensity of the relationship they entertain with the outside from their position with their glass bells.

In any case, in comparing religion to the purest of lights, the text does not support the claim that Wittgenstein defended religious beliefs as inherently lacking in cognitive value. It manifestly contradicts other texts by Wittgenstein in which, consistent with his anti-essentialism, he casts doubt on the existence of a single religion that each culture would, as it were, reveal by occluding it: indeed, if individuals behind their colored glass can see what surrounds them, it is thanks to the white light in which everything basks. Obviously, if everything they see has the same color, it is only because of the particular culture through which they access reality. Consequently, it is difficult to read this text without conceiving of some transcendent source of truth, along the lines of Plato's Idea of the Good. Yet this interpretation sits uneasily with Wittgenstein's refusal to identify religious belief with knowledge, even second-rate knowledge. The fact remains that, in interpreting this text, the first idea that comes to mind is the opposition between natural religion and positive religion, despite the obvious fact that Wittgenstein clearly rejected the idea of a rational religion that was both present and hidden in historical religions. Bouveresse thus has every reason to conclude his book by observing that the religion of human beings who escape their culture "might be a religion with no god or transcendence whatsoever." Yet it is hard to reconcile this claim with the 1925 text.

When confronted with the sheer diversity of the Viennese philosopher's texts on religion, it is completely logical to conclude, as Bouveresse does, that Wittgenstein's position is "obviously much harder to determine" than Russell's. In any case, this allegorical text is embarrassing in the way it contradicts the *Tractatus*, insofar as it suggests that it is possible to access a position which transcends a subject's beliefs—a position from which one can see that these beliefs are encapsulated in a specific culture. Nor is this claim consistent with the anti-essentialism of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In any case, there is little doubt that if the only basis we had for determining his position on religion was thus peculiar and so (as I am paradoxically inclined to say) un-Wittgensteinian fable, it would be hard to tell that Wittgenstein, like Russell, insisted on a radical denial of religious belief's cognitive powers. Yet while there is nothing mysterious about the elements of religion that Russell was willing to preserve—namely, a number of its values—grasping how Wittgenstein could claim that religion has positive attributes while denying it any capacity for understanding remains highly problematic. One of the great merits of Bouveresse's book is to expose the fundamental ambiguity of Wittgenstein's religious views.

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