

Review by Prof. Don Carveth, forthcoming (2016) in the *Journal of Psychohistory*

Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi (2015). *Psychological Perspectives on Religion and Religiosity*. London & New York: Routledge. Paperback, 316 pages. ISBN 978-0-415-68287-9

Benjamin Beit-Hallahmi is Professor of Psychology at the University of Haifa. In this book he applies scientific psychology, including cognitive evolutionary psychology and perspectives from sociology, anthropology and psychoanalysis, to the study of religion. He reviews findings from a multitude of empirical studies regarding the psychological roots of religion, the role of social learning and identity in its formation, variations in religiosity, women and religion, the consequences and correlates of religiosity, conversion and conversion-dependent groups, psychoanalytic contributions to the study of religion, and the issue of secularization and the persistence of religion. The author's writing is lucid and sustains the reader's interest while reviewing the results of countless empirical studies and assessing their most salient implications for the understanding of religion. His approach is consistently that of the empirical social scientist. Regrettably, Routledge chose to print this book using a small type font that may create difficulty for the aging reader, as it did for this reviewer.

As a sociologist and psychoanalyst who has often been unimpressed by a good deal of the research produced by positivistic psychology, I have to acknowledge that Beit-Hallahmi has led me to qualify my views in this area. Much of the empirical work he reviews here meaningfully addresses important questions in this field, offering clear evidence for and against various assumptions, propositions and theories about religion. The author's approach is that of Enlightenment rationalism and empiricism. There is no theology or postmodern obscurantism here, only interpretation of relevant empirical research findings for important questions concerning religion. In the spirit of the Enlightenment he writes that "What is socially and politically significant is that a strong religious commitment may interfere with support for religious freedom and tolerance, as the concern of group members for their own rights does not extend to the rights of others" (p. 148). In this connection he quotes Slavoj Zizek who argues "Atheism is a European legacy worth fighting for, not least because it creates a safe public space for believers" (Zizek, 2006, p. A 23 as quoted by Beit-Hallahmi, p. 148).

The author begins by clearly defining religion as supernaturalism: "Religion is a belief system which includes the notion of a supernatural, invisible world, inhabited by gods, human souls, angels, demons, and other conscious spirit entities. ... A supernaturalist belief system does not have to refer to gods, but it does always refer to spirit entities (ancestors, ghosts, angels, etc.) which have some power over humans and can affect their lives" (p. 3). Like Sigmund Freud (1927, 1930), who demanded that adherents of demythologized, metaphoric or "As If" readings of religious traditions admit that in abandoning literalism and supernaturalism they had in fact embraced atheism, Beit-Hallahmi, together with the many other contributors to the psychology of religion whom he cites in support of his view, argues that if there are no supernatural elements central to the belief system it is not religion.

Instead of in this way clearly distinguishing religion from atheism, Erich Fromm (1950) distinguishes authoritarian from what he calls "humanistic" religion. To me, the latter term has always seemed an oxymoron. While no doubt some religious traditions are more authoritarian and less humane than others, if we define humanism in terms of the Protagorean view that "man is the measure of all things," such a man-centered or anthropocentric perspective is clearly incompatible with religion as a god- or spirit-centered system of belief. In his later years, Fromm became interested in Buddhism which, unlike the Abrahamic religions is not a form of theism. But many Buddhist traditions nevertheless qualify as religion by Beit-Hallahmi's criterion in that they are permeated by supernatural beliefs. Forms of

Buddhism and related meditative practices that are absent of any supernatural elements or claims would qualify as types of philosophy and related ways of life rather than religion. Whether they would qualify as humanistic is open to debate, since in seeking forms of transcendence of egocentricity they may in fact be seeking to transcend anthropocentrism as well. In this area Beit-Hallahmi's work seems at times oversimplified. He refers to the supernaturalist experience of "mystical union with a deity or with nature" (p. 68), as if there is no valid distinction between the former and the latter; as if all experiences of unity with nature must somehow entail supernaturalism when in fact they may reflect the expanded naturalism that recognizes our intrinsic connectedness or embeddedness in nature. Just as Freud (1930) reduced the "oceanic" experience to infantile primary narcissism prior to differentiation of self and other (a stage that thanks to empirical infant research we now know does not exist), so Beit-Hallahmi appears to relegate it to the realm of religion. But it is our failure to recognize our continuity with nature (a connectedness that, however celebrated by mystics, is now recognized by physicists as the "butterfly effect") that has resulted in the exaggerated sense of human exceptionalism, the anthropocentrism that I believe has contributed greatly to anthropogenic climate disruption (ACD).

Unlike many psychologists oriented toward empirical research, Beit-Hallahmi is Freud-friendly. He endorses much of Freud's (1927) theory of religion as grounded in wishful illusion serving to defend against anxiety arising from human helplessness, as well as Ernest Becker's (1973) view of it as a denial of death, a perspective elaborated as so-called terror-management theory. Regrettably, Beit-Hallahmi describes (p. 188) but fails to offer any critical discussion of Farrell's (1955) confused critique of Freud's definition of illusion as a belief not proven to be either true or false but believed because of the wish that it be so. Neither does Beit-Hallahmi address Freud's failure to explain why, having defined religion as illusion in 1927, only three years later he redefines it as delusion (a belief capable of scientific invalidation yet believed despite this fact). Such deficiencies with respect to Freud scholarship aside, the author draws usefully on cognitive-evolutionary psychology to show how religion is grounded in the very architecture of the intuitive as distinct from the reflective mode of mental functioning: Its egocentrism, anthropocentrism, animism and teleological inclinations that, unless corrected by reflective functioning, incline it to interpret events as resulting from intentionality and design. While I find much of this argument convincing, its extension by the author to include what he, like Freud, considers the illusion of free will reflects an unwarranted excess of positivism that conflates human freedom and responsibility with religious supernaturalism. Beit-Hallahmi sidesteps entirely any discussion of the difficulties such determinism creates for ethical and legal theory. In my view, and as secular existentialism recognizes, we are both a part of nature and at the same time sufficiently apart from it to experience a degree of freedom and responsibility, not least toward nature itself.

In keeping with his determinism, Beit-Hallahmi emphasizes the role of social learning in the formation of religious identity arguing the latter "has nothing to do with choice or deliberation and everything to do with the accidents of birth and history" (p. 34). Regarding the role that gender plays in religion he writes that "women, rather than men, are those who are responsible for the persistence and survival of religious traditions. The study of religious believers is the study of women. This is a secret to most of the world, and our responsibility is to make it known" (p. 234). In the related field of the sociology of religion it has often been argued that while most sociologists in the 1960s embraced the secularization hypothesis, confidently predicting the continued decline of religion, developments in subsequent decades, religious revivals in both the East and the West, proved them to have been naïve. But the data Beit-Hallahmi reviews indicates that, on the contrary, they were right after all: "It is clear that humanity is investing much less in religious activities today compared to 1000 years ago, 500 years ago, 100 years ago, or 50 years ago" (p. 206), with the exception of the Islamic world where secularization is limited. Overall, "the number of individuals who identify as having no religion ... has been growing worldwide"

(p. 207). And yet religion persists, often only in the form of an “identity shell” ... tied to minimal ritual participation, and without adherence to any explicit norms” (p. 224), sometimes in the form of the New Age “spirituality” that Beit-Hallahmi describes as a form of “privatized, low-orthodoxy supernaturalism” (p. 230). The book concludes with the author’s plea for more first-rate psychological research contributing to the development of the new psychology of religion unburdened by religious apologetics.

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