

RELIGION AND HUMAN BEHAVIOR: A Review of William N. Schoenfeld's *Religion and Human Behavior* (Authors Cooperative, 206pp., 1993, \$16.95)

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What makes behavioral psychology powerful as an explanatory system is that, in resolutely attending to observable stimulus and response while resisting the temptation to peek into the black box in between, it has generated replicable, accurate data that demystify some of the puzzles of animal and human behavior. In his recent book, *Religion and Human Behavior*, W.N. Schoenfeld has made the attempt to shine the same tough-minded light of behaviorism into religious practices. Intended primarily as a textbook, *Religion and Human Behavior* discusses such topics as religious actions and feelings, religious genius, God, miracles, death and immortality, sin and evil, prayer and ritual, belief and heresy.

The project is potentially important in extending behavior analysis to aspects of human experience often described as sublime, mysterious and awesome. All too often positivistic thinking, first in reaction to Medieval theologizing, and then, in our own century, to a terrible misreading of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [Wittgenstein's (1961) ambitious and failed attempt to definitively resolve all philosophical problems], has so limited its subject matter that whatever is really interesting has been excluded as meaningless. Contemporary philosophers have been left endlessly worrying over stripped-bare sentences like 'the cat is on the mat,' while their colleagues in psychology laboratories plod through parametric studies instead of dealing with questions of ultimate meaning in human experience.

A book on religion by a behaviorist thus promises to be a refreshing change. In the Preface, Schoenfeld says that in the entire literature purporting to be about the psychology of religion, he could glean "no more than a few sentences... which make contact with present-day experimental behavioral science and the principles of behavior which that science has discovered by laboratory analysis" (p. ix). He asserts, "The very responses of people to the requirements of their religions constitute natural phenomena" (p x), so why not study them as behaviors?

As a longtime professor at Queens College, Columbia, and CUNY, and also as co-author with F.S. Keller (1950) of the classic *Principles of Psychology*, Dr. Schoenfeld's credentials are impeccably behavioral. He courageously proposes to address—as a behaviorist—such questions as:

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From what behavioral principles are the key religious concepts drawn?

What makes a certain religious dogma believable by an ordinary man?

What makes the utterances of one man, say a religion's founder, attractive to a potential convert?

What makes one religion viable in the behavioral repertory of people, and therefore "successful," while another religion is not? (p. xi)

Such a fascinatingly wide scope of inquiry obviously demands a view of behaviorism that goes far beyond laboratory work previously done. Schoenfeld maintains that "Any statement about behavior can be explicated in a religious sense, but also in a scientific one so long as it is objectively descriptive" (p. xii). He defines as behavioral both actions and verbal utterances, "even those having to do with non-verbal behavior as the referent" (p. xii). More about this later.

Schoenfeld's armchair analysis of religious behavior is, apparently, based on reasonable but untested (untestable?) generalizations from previous experimental results. He offers many intriguing conceptualizations. For example, Schoenfeld suggests that the religious customs surrounding bereavement are there to fill the stimulus void left when the survivors no longer receive their accustomed stimulus cues from the departed. Elsewhere, he explains prayer as verbal behavior in which the person praying generalizes from a reinforcement history of conversation to function as his or her own hearer and changes behavior because of hearing himself or herself speak. Schoenfeld observes that when ritualistic behavior earns social reinforcement only because of its form, it becomes degraded; it is actually no longer having an effect on the individual, who is attending to other things.

The author refers to Skinner's (1948) classic "Superstition in the Pigeon" to shed light on how prayer and ritual may be maintained. Pigeons that received food on an arbitrary schedule, regardless of how they were responding, showed greatly increased wing-flapping, whirling, or other eccentric behavior which happened to be occurring when food appeared. Analogously, the devout pensioner who often prays finds that sometimes her Social Security check falls through the mail slot while she is doing so. Consequently, her praying behavior increases.

Schoenfeld offers many insights which furnish hints of what a full-scale operant analysis of religious behavior could be. He asserts that religion may "disguise its practical thrust with words that appear wholly impractical and visionary... but a closer examination of the language will reveal a co-functioning glossary that is oriented toward the natural environment... If a religion is to "work", and so to survive, it must demand and evoke behavior from its followers that is consonant with man's repertory and potentiality as a biological organism" (pp. 14-15). Schoenfeld suggests that a behavior analysis of religious admonitions would be an interesting undertaking. For example, one question that might be asked is what does it actually mean in terms of discriminative stimuli, responses and consequences to follow Christ's advice, "Love thy neighbor as thyself"?

In Chapter 3 on Miracle and Science, we are introduced to an account of the scientific method in which an attempt is made to refute Hume's strictly associationistic theory of causality. Schoenfeld specifically deplores loose thinking among scientists, yet his arguments against Hume are less behavioristic and less closely reasoned than those used by Hume himself. It is here that the chief weakness

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of this book is exposed. It is that the Schoenfeld, despite a lifetime of disciplined, scientific discourse, seems unwilling or unable to refrain from wandering back and forth between the glossaries of behaviorism, naive realism and theology. In reading this book one gets the queasy feeling that reason is functioning a posteriori to support conclusions previously arrived at by other means. That is not unusual; it is merely unacceptable.

This problem with Schoenfeld's approach is foreshadowed in the definition cited above from the Preface. What is "non-verbal behavior"? This is an area that modern behavioral philosophers are exploring; a firm substrate for speculation does not exist. Is the non-verbal behavior to which Schoenfeld refers physical action? Then it is a redundancy. Is it non-verbal and non-expressed internal experience? Then it is non-behavioral. Like steam escaping from an unsealed pressure cooker, the rigor of a scientific analysis is lost as the author moves outside his own prescribed behavioral limits.

In another example, the author asserts that genius "lies in what is seen, and how it is expressed. [The religious genius] sees God and man together, otherwise he would be secular" (p. 16). But, what is "God" to which (whom?) Schoenfeld refers (in Chapter 2)? While Schoenfeld is behavioral in his approach to phenomena, he does not hesitate to use metaphysical terms without operational definitions. The behaviorally anchored and the speculatively unanchored are tossed together in a word salad that is treacherous to the untutored reader and disappointing to the professional. This is "science" at its most slippery. It contains the error against which Kant famously objected: the extension of metaphysical concepts beyond empirical bounds.

What do we make of sentences like the one we find in Chapter 2: "Yet God remains a subject to everyone." What is the referent (and the subject)? Where is the behavior? A little closer to the behaviorist perspective would be Schoenfeld's assertion that "the priest merely injects his religion into the communicant's repertory" (p. 17). If by "injects" we take the author to mean modifies, well and good. But then we will want to know just how such a process is accomplished.

Schoenfeld's lack of reference to the considerable and sometimes quite respectably scientific literature on religious behavior by transpersonal psychologists is puzzling. Although there are no operant studies in this area, many aspects of the field have been more than anecdotally studied. Wulff's (1989) *The Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary Views* contains biological research, behavioral data and experimental findings based on research. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* has, since 1969, published theoretical and experimental studies of meditation, monasticism, peak experiences, belief systems, spirituality in psychotherapy, shamanism, altered states of consciousness (Speeth, 1981; 1989). Despite the availability of this literature, Schoenfeld apparently ignored or overlooked it. Another real loss is the author's lack of contact with the extensive and even more historical corpus of works on the phenomenology of religion, as, for example, the substantial and quite thorough (albeit non-operant) Van der Leeuw's (1986) *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*.

At this point, the reviewer digresses to address another issue that is perhaps more serious: the use of masculine gender throughout the book. Schoenfeld excuses himself in the Preface. Yet today replacing "he" with "she", for example in half its

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instances, is a simple word processor operation. Schoenfeld's explanation that such a change would be difficult or would involve awkward phraseology rings hollow. Our language is a living thing and eminently shapeable; everyone is responsible for his or her verbal behavior which will not only express personal bias but also affect hearers. "His or her" may be "linguistically ugly", but, pragmatically, it is a rare university professor today who adopts a text lacking gender balance. Today there would be consequences for adopting a text with gender bias, and the probability of such outcomes apparently exerts some control over textbook selection today. Where ethics goes unheard politics must insist.

Returning to the main thrust of this review, the content of this book is problematic in that it weaves back and forth between domains of discourse so that we as readers must continually attempt the task of weighing incommensurables. Of course, behavioral psychology is not the only language-game possible, but it is Schoenfeld's avowed project to apply it to religious behavior. There are a multitude of ways to speak, to imagine, and to reason and many ways to assess validity. There is no one logic, nor is there one right criterion. We owe to Wittgenstein (who repudiated the unifying intent of the *Tractatus*) our modern insight into the multiplicity of ways by which reality can be meaningfully viewed. The only criterion for assessing truth value is that one stay within a form of discourse so that certain propositions can function as givens or hinges against which other assertions can be tested. Schoenfeld's ideas are difficult to evaluate, because he repeatedly switches linguistic frames of reference.

Religion and Human Behavior has pointed to a possible application of behaviorist theory to previously unanalysed aspects of human personal and social experience. In so doing Schoenfeld has not only broken taboos that many found too constraining, but also offered some intriguing insights into religious customs and beliefs. This volume is an ambitious initial step in the direction of making the legacy of Watson, Tolman, and Skinner relevant to deep religious issues that concern many human beings today.

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