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Religion within Reason by Steven M. Cahn (review)

Oliver Leaman

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BOOK REVIEW

Religion within Reason. By Steven M. Cahn, New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. Pp. 105. ISBN 978-0-231-18161-7.



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Although this book has the merit of being short, it is short in a bad way, since there is almost nothing of significance in it. About 90 pages of text might seem a short read, but since there is very little argument in it the passage from start to finish is tedious. There seems to be a stage that some philosophers go through of approaching a topic they do not know much about and thinking they have got to the essence of it by ignoring the detail, while in fact they have entirely bypassed the important issues. Some call this approach provocative, and it probably is a correct description, in the same way that a heckler who shouts out at a political rally "liar" is being provocative. No-one would claim that he or she is contributing to political philosophy, though.

Cahn keeps on quoting a religious passage and then dismissing it because the obvious interpretation of it is problematic, and this reader kept on thinking "yes but". Such passages can mean so many other things, and often do, and taking this scatter gun approach to knocking down straw men has little point to it. Perhaps the traditional arguments in the philosophy of religion are all invalid, or based on an error, but to show this will take more than 90 pages. Philosophers who produce arguments about religion are often very aware of the objections to that genre of argument, which is why they constantly seek to refine and change them to make them valid. Perhaps they are all invalid but it will take more than the nice knockdown argument we find here to establish that. Books like this one seek a simple solution to complex problems. It reminds me of a friend of mine who suggests, when I am dealing with an awkward child, that I just tell the child to behave herself. It is not as simple as that.

Cahn likes the idea of religious commitment without supernaturalism, and he ends the book with a famous Yiddish story which he obviously thinks illustrates his position: "If not higher" by Peretz. In the story a skeptic follows the Rabbi of Nemirov who disappears when he is supposed to be praying with his congregation and everyone wonders if he goes to heaven. The skeptic decides to follow him surreptitiously to find out, and in fact he goes to help an elderly lady keep warm by providing her with wood and by lighting a fire. While he does this he recites the prayers appropriate for the time and season. When the skeptic returns and is asked if the rabbi goes to heaven he says "if not

higher", hence the title of the story. Cahn does not appreciate the irony of the story though and the fact that it could have a whole variety of meanings. Surely the rabbi is likely to have a commitment to supernaturalism, he does not just do good deeds, he prays at the same time, and when the skeptic becomes a disciple of the rabbi, as he does at the end of the story, he also presumably commits himself to more than just doing good deeds. The story could be taken to show the significance of prayer combined with charity, or the lack of significance of praying in a certain place, or the nobility of anonymous charity, or the moral acceptability of unconventional behavior, or how someone's opinion can be suddenly changed, or all these things and many more in a variety of permutations. This unsatisfactory ending typifies the problematic nature of the entire book, a lack of subtlety and sophistication throughout. Philosophers often feel free to treat religion in this sort of way when they would hesitate to do the same with any other area of cultural life, but it is a temptation to be avoided.

