

Tim Crane, *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017. 224pp. \$25.50 (hbk).

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The English translation of Martin Heidegger's 1920-21 lectures on St. Paul saw publication during one of the more fascinating recent movements within the so-called "continental" tradition of philosophy: the rediscovery and reinterpretation of the aforementioned apostle by atheist political theorists. Alain Badiou, for instance, has maintained that Paul is worth engaging for the procedural structure of his politics rather than the content of his theological assertions. Similarly, Simon Critchley has more recently argued for a reading of Paul's "inward" faith, one that relies not on the "abstraction of a metaphysical belief in God" but instead for "lived subjective commitment to an infinite demand," whatever that means.¹

Regardless of what one thinks of these interpretations of Paul, that atheist continental philosophers are continually engaging with Christian thought in seemingly constructive ways is something the analytic tradition ought to admire and aspire towards. There has been little of such interaction between atheism and religion in the analytic tradition, perhaps due to that tradition's emphasis on metaphysical and epistemological issues about God and the rationality of belief rather than about religion as a phenomenon of human life. Unfortunately, there is little room in such debates for atheists and agnostics interested in the non-metaphysical aspects of religion to offer serious philosophical reflection.

Tim Crane's newest book, *The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View*, offers a sketch of what an atheist, analytic engagement with religion might look like. While *The Meaning of Belief* is written as a non-academic text, primarily intended as a contribution to public debates about religion, it is nonetheless a work of philosophy. Indeed, part of what makes Crane's contribution to public debates about religion fruitful is his use of contemporary philosophical work being done in philosophy of mind (see his compelling account on the "intentionality" of the sacred in chapter three) and action theory (his use of Scanlon's work on reasons and rationality in chapter four should provide general readers with enough warrant to dismiss the New Atheists' trite assertions about the necessary irrationality of believers). This distinguishes Crane from the likes of Daniel Dennett and A.C. Grayling, both of whom seem unconcerned with leaving their philosophical training behind them when turning to polemics about religion.

The Meaning of Belief is divided into five chapters. Chapter one, "Religion and the Atheist's Point of View," offers a general outline of the public debate about religion and a sketch of what Crane takes religion to be. Here, Crane's central contention is that the new

¹ Simon Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2012), 13.

atheists have an inadequate conception of religion, built around a conception of God as a supernatural agent who, in turn, functions as both a scientific hypothesis and a moral standard. This conception, Crane maintains, has led to a standstill in public debates about religion. This is not only because the new atheists' notion of religion is a "distorted view of religious phenomena" and that their conception of God is "at once too sophisticated and too simplistic," but also on account of most religious believers inability to "recognize themselves in the picture of religion painted by the New Atheists" (12, 34). The inability of believers to recognize themselves in the New Atheist's picture is because the New Atheists "fail to understand" religion in the first place (4).

Perhaps such allegations against the New Atheists would be unsurprising from the likes of Edward Feser or David Bentley Hart, both of whom have written some of the more interesting contributions to this debate in recent years. Yet while Feser and Hart argue that the New Atheists poorly understand both the concept of God and the arguments for God's existence, they also maintain that theism is *true*, and that one is more rational in accepting theism over agnosticism or atheism. In contrast, Crane is explicitly an atheist. Yet he does not seek to argue that theism is false in *The Meaning of Belief*. Rather, Crane assumes his readers are atheists, and hopes to guide them in understanding religion better than the New Atheists have.

Against conceptions of religion that reduce it to either the metaphysical or the moral (or both), Crane defines religion as "a systematic and practical attempt by human beings to find meaning in the world and their place in it in terms of their relationship to something transcendent" (6). This definition further divides into Crane's two central aspects of religion: what he calls "the religious impulse" and "identification." The religious impulse is "the need to live one's life in harmony with the transcendent," whereas religious identification is the idea that "one does not just *believe* a religion, one *belongs* to it" (110, emphasis mine). Although one can experience the religious impulse without belonging to a religion and belong to a religion without the experience of the religious impulse, it is the combination of the two that satisfies Crane's account of religion.

Crane's description of the religious impulse, the axis around which chapter two revolves, is as sympathetic an offering as a theist could hope for from an atheist. Here, Crane is concerned with accusations that religious belief is either counterintuitive or a way of succumbing to a kind of Nietzschean *ressentiment*: the claim that someone has failed to acknowledge that the world and our lives may fail to make sense to us. In the case of believers, the assertions of *ressentiment* are of a familiar sort: the religious are so paralyzed by the prospect of death and a universe without meaning that they deceive themselves into believing in a God and afterlife as a means of protecting themselves against an ultimately purposeless universe.

Against this, Crane maintains that the religious impulse is an entirely intelligible way to make sense of the world. Of course, Crane believes that the religious impulse is a misrepresentation of the facts, but it does not follow from this misrepresentation that the religious impulse is misguided, self-deceptive, or cowardly. Indeed, as A.W. Moore addresses in his underacknowledged *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty* (New York: Routledge, 2003), belief in God can be seen as an extension of a more general hope that we can make sense of things, a hope needed if we are to sustain our commitment to rationality. As such, belief in God is not any less intelligible than our general commitment to make sense of things, though it may involve having more faith that we can do so.

What of the claim that religion is counterintuitive? It's not entirely clear what exactly the assertion amounts to, but I take it to be a way of expressing something like the following remark: the world presents itself to us naturalistically and as that which can be satisfactorily described and explained in naturalist terms. Additionally, naturalism is simpler than theism. As such, we have no need to posit weird, immaterial entities to explain the world, since naturalism can do so without postulating such immaterial entities?

On Crane's view, there are two major mistakes made by the above remark. First, he notes that a belief's seeming intuitive is dependent upon one's culture and upbringing. As such, different beliefs will seem intuitive or natural to different groups of people. Thus, "counterintuitive" is an unhelpful term to apply concerning religion, particularly when trying to understand it. Second, to think of religious belief as "intuitive" or "counterintuitive" is to reduce it to a belief about theoretical matters. Although there may be a theoretical component to religious belief, e.g., God as an explanation of why anything exists at all, its content is more complex than that. Since this is the case, Crane seems to argue, religious belief cannot properly be seen as counterintuitive. This is not to say that particular religious beliefs do not seem counterintuitive to those who do not partake in religious forms of life. Rather, it is to claim that what seems intuitive or counterintuitive depends on the language-game(s) one plays; there is no such thing as counterintuitive *simpliciter*.

Religion, then, is one way of making sense of things. But it is not a scientific way of making sense of things. That is, what religious sense-making hopes to achieve is not what scientific sense-making hopes to achieve. What Crane calls "the religious impulse" is a yearning for a transcendental way of making sense of things, a kind of sense-making which, by its very nature, is beyond the physical, and thus beyond what the sciences can make sense of. Yet for all that, the religious impulse is only one component of religion. Religion is something a person identifies with – it has a social character. Part of this social character is the repetition of practices: one does not just identify with one's immediate religious community, but also with the members of that community through time.

Crane labels the broadly social and practice-oriented aspects of religion as *identification*, devoting chapter three to unpacking what identification is and how it is distinct from a set of moral principles. For analytic philosophers of religion, this chapter is perhaps the most worthwhile. Here Crane uses philosophical tools to contemplate religious life without lapsing into apologetics, offering a genuine contribution to the philosophy of religion. Consequently, it is both more interesting and risky than the other chapters of *The Meaning of Belief*.

As chapter two sought to combat misunderstandings about the metaphysical and transcendental aspects of religion, chapter three finds Crane resisting the reduction of religion to its moral component. He begins his discussion with the following quote by Dworkin: "The conventional theistic religions with which most of us are familiar – Judaism, Christianity, Islam – have two parts: a science part and a value part. . . . the value part of conventional theistic religion offers a variety of convictions about how to live and what they should value" (84-85). Crane contends that, while there is something right about Dworkin's acknowledgement of the metaphysical and value-based components of religion, religion is something more. To show this, Crane lists elements of religious life that he contends are "surely not" moral with their respective religions, such as pilgrimages, keeping Kosher, praying, and fasting. Such injunctions are not moral, since morality is a matter of how we treat others. Crudely, since such aspects of religious life are not moral, religion cannot be

reduced to metaphysics and morality without significant loss. So, Dworkin is wrong in claiming that religion is just a combination of metaphysical and value components.

It is noteworthy that Crane's argument fails as an objection to Dworkin. Even on the assumption the practices Crane lists are not moral, it would be implausible to claim that they have *nothing* to do with what one should value. Indeed, Crane concedes as much. But this is just what Dworkin claims: that there is a *value* component to religion. Thus, Crane's contention that such practices are not moral does not conflict with Dworkin's own claims. More importantly, Crane's own evaluation of the aforementioned religious practices as nonmoral is, if not outright false, then certainly up for debate. From inside of each respective religion, it seems implausible that Crane could claim that the kind of practices he has in mind are *surely* not moral. In Jewish philosophy since World War Two, for instance, there has been significant philosophical debate concerning the metaphysical significance of Halakha – on whether the overriding injunctions it prescribes are moral in nature. This shows that there is at least no straightforward answer to whether or not being Kosher is moral injunction or not.

Even if Crane is ultimately right that morality is primarily a matter of how we treat others, it would go against the nature of his project to claim that devout Jews are straightforwardly wrong in taking some of their practices as moral. From inside Jewish life, such a question is unclear. To make any progress in "what religion means to people," as Crane puts it, we must take seriously how the religious generally understand the weight and nature of divine commands. If we dismiss particular divine commands as non-moral injunctions where a religious person would interpret those same commands as moral, we have failed to understand religion. This is not to say that their view might not be false: it cannot be true if God does not exist. Regardless of whether theism is true or false, we fail to understand religious life when we fail to understand how adherents to a religion receive alleged divine commands.

Chapters four and five concern religious violence and religious tolerance respectively. Both of these chapters make modest claims that only someone utterly enamored by the New Atheist ethos would take serious qualms with. Chapter four finds Crane maintaining that religious belief does not necessarily entail unreasonableness or irrationality, a claim I suspect readers of Analytic Theology will have no qualms assenting to. Moreover, religious believers may in fact be reasonable and rational in believing that God exists, even if this belief is false. These claims are relevant to the relationship between religion and violence because of the New Atheists' notion that assenting to a proposition without evidence leads the assenter to committing atrocities. According to Sam Harris, for instance, a person who believes a proposition without evidence is "capable of anything." Of course, if Reformed Epistemology has taught us anything, it is that we believe all sorts of things without evidence. Clearly, many of the things we believe without evidence do not make us capable of committing atrocious actions. The belief that there seems to be a chair in front of me, for instance, is not based upon any evidence, and believing that there seems to be a chair in front of me does not make me capable of committing serious violence. Thus, even on their poor picture of rationality, the New Atheist contention that irrationality is correlated with wickedness is an implausible one.

That said, there seems to be a more intimate connection between religion and violence than other beliefs we hold not based upon evidence. Indeed, Crane does not dismiss all connection between religion and violence just because there is no necessary entailment

between the two. Still, since religion is more than just theoretical belief, the issue is more complex than the New Atheists would like to think, and the link between “religion” and “violence” is one that Crane carefully unpacks. It is not a particularly philosophical discussion, but one that may be of interest to those curious about very general discussions about religion and society at large.

The same goes for Crane’s final chapter. Unless one has serious qualms with religion generally or the notion of “tolerance,” Crane’s account should seem modest enough. Given that religion is not going to disappear, atheists need to find a way to live with those they disagree with. The first step towards fruitful co-existence between the religious and the secular is achieving mutual understanding: this is precisely what Crane sought to offer in the earlier chapters of the book. The next is to discern how to respect other persons while disagreeing, as well as occasionally having serious moral objections to another person’s way of life. Discerning how to change an agent who holds morally atrocious beliefs is a complex matter, and it is not one that can seriously be discussed in such a short book. In this regard, Crane offers a broadly correct answer with regards to those we disagree with (respect and tolerate them) while raising the more difficult questions to be asked in longer, more detailed discussions (e.g., with what limits should we tolerate other persons’ beliefs or actions?).

Crane’s book will, I hope, shift the public debate about religion in the right direction. The account of religion he advances is far more plausible than those offered by many of his fellow atheists, and the questions *The Meaning of Belief* leaves one with are important ones. A book that can offer a contribution to both philosophy of religion and public intellectual life is surely an achievement, not in the least because it suggests a more fruitful kind of dialogue between theists and non-theists. If *The Meaning of Belief* is any indication of what the future of public religions discourse holds, then there is much to be optimistic about.