with no philosophical training. *Against Marriage* is surely going to compel its readers to think deeply whether the institution of marriage is still viable and about how the regulation of adult personal relationships may have to be altered to meet the demands of justice.

MARKO KONJOVIĆ
Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

Tim Crane, The Meaning of Belief: Religion from an Atheist's Point of View*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017, xiv + 207 pp.*

While not intended as an academic treatise on religion, Tim Crane's *The Meaning of Belief* is a thoughtful, interesting reflection on the nature of religious belief in contemporary life. The book is clearly and fluidly written, as one would expect from Crane, and its main theme will be refreshing to those who are weary of the cliché-ridden debates between the New Atheists and their theistic interlocutors. Crane's central thesis is that many of his fellow atheists incorrectly identify religion with a mere set of cosmological and moral propositions, falsely leading them to believe that religious people will tend to change their minds after exposure to the right philosophical or scientific arguments. The book is very rich, and it would be impossible to name all its virtues without resorting to a laundry list; I recommend the title for its expansiveness alone. However, I found Crane's overall argument unconvincing.

Crane asks, "What is religion, and how does it move people?" and accurately responds that a strict, universal definition of religion is probably impossible (2–4). He endorses Durkheim's claim that religions are best understood by following how they developed historically, and then provides his own definition of religion: "Religion, as I am using the word, is 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). He elaborates upon these points in the next two chapters in terms of "the religious impulse" and the phenomenon of "identification."

One puzzling aspect of this first chapter is Crane's insistence upon the theoretical and practical value of his own definition of religion, despite his admission that religion probably does not have an exhaustive or universal essence. He seems to vacillate between a hard realism, which (apparently) prevents one from calling "socialism, communism, environmentalism, scientism, humanism, secularism, and atheism" religions ("[W]hat would be the point of this?" Crane asks (24)) and a softer anti-essentialism which allows that there is likely no single essence of religion. Crane recognizes that religion is a historically-conditioned category that may not have been used as a concept through much of history; in the end, however, he clearly settles into a realist mode. I wish he had better explained and justified this move. Why is it best to act as if that there is some real phenomenon which lies behind the bundle of characteristics ('systematicity, practicality, mean-

ing-seeking, relatedness to the transcendent') which are supposedly concatenated in 'religion', given that these characteristics can be isolated and found in combination with other things (as Crane acknowledges)? I do not believe that Crane successfully captures the phenomenon (if there is one), and this is presuming that the individual items in the 'religious' bundle (e.g. 'transcendence') are well-defined categories themselves, which I do not think Crane proves. I think that the book also overlooks motives which both secularists and religious people might have for wishing to do away with the category of religion at a political level. On the secular front, some might point out that religious organizations are often given special protections and privileges simply because they are 'religious,' and some might see this as unjustified. Similarly, religious people might note that 'religious' arguments are seldom taken seriously in public discourse and might inquire as why these arguments deserve no consideration simply because (if Crane is correct) religion appeals to a normative transcendent order or involves group identity. Crane does not closely address such political considerations, which is unfortunate given their relevance to his overall message.

Other interesting discussions in the chapter concern the nature of the supernatural (Crane does not believe that this category is helpful in distinguishing religion from non-religion, since the category is based on contestable, modern assumptions about nature, and would not distinguish religion from magic (10)); the features of belief ("accessibility to consciousness, connection to action, and the aim toward truth" (16)); and the differences among atheism, agnosticism, and humanism. Crane's points on these topics are never groundbreaking, but they are clear and plausible. Crane's novel thesis—that the New Atheists miss the point of religion—is less plausible; I shall return to this later.

The next chapter discusses an element of religion which apparently differentiates it from other belief-systems: relatedness-to-transcendence or "the religious impulse." Crane cites James, explaining that the religious impulse is the tendency to believe in an unseen order which is the source of normativity (36–37). Crane accepts James' general hypothesis, though notes a difficulty with it: everyone, including the scientist, believes in an unseen order, whether it be an order of gods or quarks. Crane's straightforward admission on this point is admirable, as are his attempts to clarify the difference between the transcendent world of science and the transcendent world of religion. But I do not think that he succeeds, and his thoughts become less and less convincing as the chapter progresses. At points, he seems to disassociate religious transcendence from normativity; at others, he seems to believe that normativity is the distinguishing mark of religious transcendence. Eventually, he attempts to define religious transcendence as involving an inherently unknowable element—this would explain, he speculates, why religious people seem immune to argument (the unknowable cannot be refuted). But what does this make of Locke's substance or Kant's *noumenon*? What if Nagel is right and we can never know what it is like to be a bat?[1] Are substances, *noumena*, and bats religiously transcendent is unknowable in some respect? Are Locke, Kant, and Nagel fundamentally religious thinkers? Anyways, it is not obvious that all religions espouse this

[1] Nagel, T. 1974. "What is it like to be a bat?" *Philosophical Review* 4: 435–50.

sort of transcendence. The ancient Greek and Roman gods, while perhaps awe-inspiring and illusive, could nonetheless be interpreted as immanent parts of the Greek and Roman worlds—and, moreover, Greek and Roman religion was not distinguished from the earthly state by its practitioners. And many in the ancient world, regarded philosophy, not religion, as the path to communion with ineffable Being.

But this is not the sole problem with the Jamesian thesis: belief in a transcendent order which is the source of normativity is not an exclusively or even primarily religious idea. In fact, the normativity of nature, in both its seen and unseen elements, is at the core of Western philosophy—it is of central importance in the work of the Socratics, Cynics, Stoics, and Neoplatonists. It was a core concept throughout medieval philosophy, and it is even accepted by some natural law theorists today. Appeals to nature in ethics, fallacious or otherwise, are common enough that have been labelled an error of thought—noteworthily, 'the *naturalistic* fallacy' not 'the *religious* fallacy.' I wish the book had addressed these issues more fully, to better provide the reader with a sense of the meaning of religious morality.

That said, Crane makes the largely commonsense claim that for the religious person, harmony with the transcendent order (in the Jamesian sense) consists in living in accord with the divine will—though he does not at all mention the divine intellect, which would have been far more important for many intellectualist mystics, such as Meister Eckhart or Thomas Merton, or for intellectualist thinkers like Aquinas. Crane says that surely the divine will lies at the heart of religion—any person who has thought hard about the nature of belief will see this. Fair enough—I am not aware of many religions which hold God's will to be *bad*, though it should be noted that some pagan religions treat the gods as capricious forces to be bribed or tamed (perhaps one might label these religions 'magical'). But, as Crane rightly notes, "The difficulty lies in detailing what this [following God's will] exactly means" (38). That said, Crane does *not* then expound upon why religious people think God's will is to be followed, an omission which has the potential for creating serious misunderstandings. For instance, in the absence of further explanation, it might sound as if Crane is suggesting that religion fundamentally involves a commitment to voluntarism or divine-command theory, which it does not. Numerous religious philosophers have non-ambiguously taken on the non-voluntarist horn of the Euthyphro dilemma—or have attempted to dodge the dilemma altogether. Even non-scholarly religious people commonly (in my experience) attempt to justify *why* God thinks various things are good—they do not simply say that God's commands are good because God commanded them. One need not be a Leibniz scholar to appreciate Voltaire's scathing critiques (e.g. in *Candide*) of optimistic, naïve religious explanations of how the slings and arrows of everyday life are somehow good and therefore somehow ordained by providence. In short, it is plainly false that it is part of the true essence of religion to simplistically respect God's will because it is God's will. But, even supposing that all religious people were voluntarists or divine-command theorists of some sort, there is no reason to suppose that God's will would be truly 'normative' for them in the moral sense. It is perfectly conceivable that one might believe in God and regard God's commands as to be obeyed with fear and trembling,

because God is the gunman-writ-infinite—if one does not obey, one will be punished. But fear of punishment need not be taken as a revelation of the true, good, or beautiful, as anyone who has seriously reflected on the meaning of these words will know—and many non-scholars, including religious non-scholars, do reflect on them. Overall, the chapter underemphasizes the great diversity of religious thought on normativity.

These objections aside, Crane posits that the 'religious impulse' is about seeking meaning in life and that the transcendent order provides meaning for religious people. Crane then asks, 'What about those who disbelieve in a transcendent order?' According to the 'pessimist' account (which Crane espouses), there is no inherent meaning to life, so we might as well learn to live without such meaning. According to the 'optimist' account, on the other hand, one might attempt to explain how, in some way, there can be meaning to life without a transcendent order: one might even argue that the notion of a transcendent order is completely irrelevant to the question of meaning. I found this entire discussion confusing—in fairness, I usually struggle to understand the 'existential' (if not semantic) meaning of meaning, which people often (incoherently, in my view) use when they discuss the meaning of life. That said, I must say that this section of the book did little to clarify my confusion. How does God's will provide existential 'meaning' for the religious person? Does God say something is meaningful, and it is meaningful? This is surely too simplistic an account. It does not account for the 'absurdist' theist who might find God's commands arbitrary and meaningless, even if he believes that they must be obeyed for the sake of avoiding Hell. Nor does meaning necessarily relate to morality, it seems, since Crane thinks we can have morality without a meaning to life—though, it is noteworthy that Crane also asserts that, as a 'pessimistic' atheist, he would find morality easier to make sense of if there were a transcendent order. I wish Crane would have expanded upon this thought—it would have clarified the vaguer points regarding the relationship between the religious impulse and normativity. Overall, the meaning of 'meaning' was unclear to me; but, in fairness, perhaps others will find it more meaningful.

Later in the chapter, Crane states that if religious believers were to take certain problems raised by atheists (e.g. 'If God created the universe, who created God?') more seriously, they ought to be worried. Of course, religious believers might retort that if Crane took certain problems raised by theists (e.g. 'How does one explain fine-tuning?') more seriously, he ought to be worried. Crane is surely aware of such retorts, and he would not be unduly self-confident if he thought he could convincingly respond to many of them in atheism's favor. What worries me is that he seems to conclude that religious sentences uttered by ordinary religious believers are not even meant to be *cognitive*—at least, not in the normal sense presumed by science (or common sense), wherein true beliefs are presumed to predict or accurately correspond to some state of affairs in the past, present, or future. According to Crane, when religious people use sentences such as 'God created the world,' they are (usually?) using them to express something other than a scientific belief, because the sentences would obviously be false if interpreted scientifically. Crane compares religious sentences to historical ones—historical claims are true or false, but do not involve simple laws or

predictions, like science's sentences do. But Crane simultaneously uses a historical example to point out that religious people are not concerned with 'scientific' prediction; Jesus apparently predicted his own return, which did not happen, and Crane concludes that religious people must not be worried about prediction, since they are not bothered by Jesus' failed prophecy. But in my experience, religious believes are bothered by it; some who become aware of the difficulty go into denial, others become atheists, and yet others choose to adopt the traditional Preterist reading of the Bible, wherein Jesus' prophesies *were* predictive, because they correctly predicted the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 A.D. One way or another, it seems unnecessary to posit a uniquely 'religious' mode of semantics in order to account for the data, and the meaning of Crane's non-scientific 'meaning' of religious sentences remains vague.

That said, I suspect that many religious people would be confused by Crane's thesis regarding the meaning of their belief; that is, I doubt Crane's thesis holds on a statistical level. The average religious person may not have arguments for God's existence or may not understand that his or her arguments for God's existence are fallacious, and he or she may not be interested (on an average day) in responding to critique, and sometimes his or her reticence to consider atheist arguments might be unjustified—but the same sort of things go for most people regarding most topics. We all make mistakes and we all dislike having these pointed out, because it hurts our reputations when we are exposed as wrong, and because we like to think that we are reasonably correct about the world and can have confidence that our beliefs are accurate. It is very threatening to be told that one's core beliefs are misguided, both for the common religious person and for the sophisticated philosopher. (After all, who genuinely enjoys the peer-review process, even if he or she is genuinely committed to the truth?) This does not make the essence of religion something vaguely emotive like honking for Jesus or cheering 'Hoorah for the mysteries of faith!' To be sure, *some* religious people regard expressions like 'Jesus rose from the dead' as non-factual (in the ordinary, historical, or 'scientific' sense) but as (somehow) still meaningful. But many religious people—probably most—do not. In my own experience, average religious people tend to believe that the propositions they express in their religious sentences are true in the 'scientific' sense, and many of them would be greatly bothered by the suggestions that these propositions are not factually correct or that they are not factually meant. Ironically, the religious 'non-cognitivist' is more likely to be the sort of sophisticated *theologian* whom Crane does not wish to discuss in this book. If religion is the opiate of the masses, the obscure search for religious 'meaning' in the face of the facts is probably a luxury of the bourgeois. But this is a matter of statistical and sociological hypothesis.

Other interesting discussions in the second chapter concern the cognitive science of religion (Crane thinks that contemporary accounts are too simplistic), the relationship between science and religion (I find Crane's account difficult to accept, as may be inferred from the above) and the meaning of faith (it is not dogmatic certainty, but something like a commitment to understanding the transcendent mystery of reality in the face of uncertainty).

In the third chapter, Crane turns to the phenomenon of 'identification,' which is the second pillar of religion. Crane correctly points out that religions are groups of people who function according to the laws of psychology and, and are not mere collections. But, as in the section on religious semantics, Crane draws distinctions which I do not believe exist. For instance, Crane suggests that aspects of religion like fasting and prayer are not explainable as the results of religious cosmological or moral belief. For, surely, if they were expressions of either of these, they would be expressions of the latter—but morality clearly consists in how one treats others. Therefore, fasting and prayer must be part of a third, sui-generis category he calls 'religious practice.'

This argument is dubious. Recent work in moral psychology[2] suggests that practices like fasting or prayer may very well be expressions of intrinsic, evolutionarily conditioned components of human morality—for instance, they may express innate moral tastes for 'purity' or 'respect,' even if these would not be recognized as truly 'moral' concerns by Western liberals. And simple observation reveals that many religions have prohibitions and taboos which have no clear relationship to 'how we treat others' in the Western liberal sense, but which are still clearly recognized as 'moral' injunctions by believers. For instance, the Catholic Church treats non-procreative sex as gravely immoral—not because non-procreative sex necessarily leads to physical, emotional, or societal harm, nor because it necessarily involves 'using' another person or violating another's autonomy *per se*, but rather because the Church holds that non-procreative sex is 'unnatural,' in the Aristotelian sense. In fairness, it has been argued that Christianity borrowed this particular taboo from Stoicism, not the Bible or Church tradition[3]—but, borrowed or not, the taboo is still, in some sense, a matter of belief for this religious group, and, doubly contrary to Crane's thesis, it is both a moral *and* cosmologically-based belief, since it only has any plausibility given that the universe is understood to function in a certain (i.e. teleological) way. Many other examples could be given as to how to reduce 'religious practice' to moral and cosmological belief—in fact, it is not clear that in-group identification is not regarded as a moral affair by religious communities. People who are not Western liberals often regard identification (or 'loyalty' and 'tradition') as a moral concern which pertains to the overall functioning of the universe (consider the Indian caste system and its relation to Dharma). It is worth remembering that many ancient Christians were persecuted by Romans for treason (and 'atheism') because they refused to participate in *patriotic* and religious rituals, such as paying homage to Caesar or the gods, because patriotism, religion, and loyalty were regarded as the same thing by many ancient peoples. (Consider that Imperial Rome's 'official' founding figure was 'Pius Aeneas.'). To this day, many non-religious citizens (including atheists) find it distasteful to burn national flags or to refuse to rise during national anthems—whether Western liberals acknowledge loyalty or tradition to be a

[2] See, for instance, Graham, J., Haidt, J., and Nosek, B. A. 2009. "Liberals and Conservatives Rely on Different Sets of Moral Foundations." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 96 (5): 1029–1046.

[3] See Noonan Jr, J. T., and Noonan, J. T. 2012. *Contraception: A History of Its treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

truly 'moral' affair or not. In sum, Crane's ground for positing the category of sui generis 'religious practice' is weak—religious taboos and traditions can probably be accounted for in moral and cosmological terms.

Crane also discusses the meanings of patriotism, pride, and shame, and briefly discusses identification in the context of Rawls. He argues that the sort of religious upbringing which the New Atheists call child indoctrination is more akin to the sort of cultural adjustment one receives in the family, and he is surely correct on this. Further on, he explains that the sorts of meaningful practices, traditions, and histories which lend meaning to religion also lend meaning to secular pursuits like academia—and again, he is surely correct. Crane completes the chapter with a discussion of Durkheim's notion of the Sacred, with Sacred things symbolically uniting the religious impulse with the phenomenon of identification through their intentionality. Skeptics of Durkheim will be reticent, but it is hard to see how Crane's basic point could be inaccurate.

The fourth chapter covers the topic of religious violence, and Crane's main points are very plausible. Crane notes that many supposedly religious conflicts have cultural, ethnic, and political undertones such that it is difficult to account for them simply in terms of doctrinal differences; that is, while differences in cosmological or moral beliefs can make a difference, the element of identification and the numerous other factors which generally fuel human conflict are probably more important. Crane understates the roles which particular beliefs do have in causing conflict (the *filioque* clause really did lead to schism), but the main point of the chapter (that religious conflicts are human conflicts) is well taken; Crane has done a great service in highlighting it.

If the first chapter began with a large question ('What is religion?'), the last chapter begins with an even larger assertion: that religion is one of "the main drivers behind world events are religion and nationhood." That said, one must learn to live with religion, because it is "wishful thinking" to suppose that religion will go away (163). To my mind, the difficulty with these assertions is that the overall secularization of many European countries seems to clearly contradict it. Though large percentages of the population do remain nominally religious in even the most atheistic European countries (e.g. France and the Czech Republic), there is little denying that religion (as defined by Crane) has become less important in everyday life. With a fair amount of data available regarding these matters I wish Crane could have argued for his claims more empirically.

The remainder of the final chapter discusses the meaning of tolerance. Being tolerant is not relativistic or paternalistic, nor does it imply respect for the beliefs one merely tolerates. By definition, toleration implies disapproval—one could not tolerate religious beliefs if one liked them or thought that they were true. The most interesting, though also most underdeveloped, section of this chapter is about the limits of tolerance. At a political level, Crane believes that we should not tolerate religious behavior beyond the rule of law, though what constitutes a reasonable boundary between law and religious liberty remains vague. This, to me, would have been a fascinating section to have more fully fleshed out. Crane spends most of the remainder of the section addressing how, on a personal level, an atheist ought

to treat legal religious behavior. 'It depends on the circumstances,' seems to be the answer. Sometimes, it may be morally commendable to even participate in religious rituals, out of respect for one's religious neighbors—for instance, by agreeing to wear a skull-cap at a Jewish friend's funeral. In other cases, one might rightly protest offensive (but legal) religious behaviors, such as the prohibition of women from the priesthood in some churches. But one should not argue against objectionable practices with philosophical or scientific arguments—these are unlikely to have an impact, since religious folk are not generally receptive to truth, even if many are reasonable and highly educated. Tolerant dialogue, which involves understanding what religion is about (an attempt to find meaning through identification with some group which talks about the transcendent), is preferable. That said, I did not find a recommendation as to how dialogue might persuade religious people to avoid offensive or immoral practices, given that philosophical or scientific arguments are off the table.

In summary, the difficulties of Crane's book lie not in its content, but in the ways in which it could have been more fully expanded in order to uphold his main criticism of the New Atheists. Crane has made fascinating psychological and sociological claims regarding religion—that religion will not go away, that religious people are unreceptive to rational arguments, that this is because of group identification and belief in an unknowable transcendent order. But Crane does not convincingly argue for *why* it is solely religious people who have their access to reason blocked through peculiar beliefs or in-group identification. As Crane acknowledges, there are many forms of belief and many forms of in-group identification—why is religion so special? Why have so many rational, non-religious (in Crane's sense of the term) thinkers in the philosophical tradition—Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, Plotinus—held beliefs in a transcendent, normative order, if such beliefs are inherently 'religious'? Is Aristotle's 'theology' just so much non-cognitive expression of in-group identification? On a more scientific note, Crane does not always back up his suggestions up with empirical data, which is problematic considering that common-sense and historical intuition contradict them. For instance, Crane largely ignores the fact that religious people *do* occasionally (I do not know how often—that is a statistical question) change their minds in the course of argument—this is often how atheists are made (and vice versa). Nor does Crane pay attention to the fact that some religious people genuinely *do* regard religion as a series of cosmological and ethical beliefs, such as the theologians whom Crane straightforwardly admits he will not discuss in the book. Overall, Crane's view of ordinary religious folk comes across as insufficiently empirical and rather pessimistic—while the New Atheists at least credit religious people with the ability to change their false beliefs, Crane denies that the average religious person is interested in truth. Whether accurate or not, the claim is empirical and requires empirical support. These issues aside, Crane's book provides food for thought, and creates plenty of ground for future research.[4]

GREGORY FRISBY
Central European University, Budapest, Hungary

[4] I thank Mark Frisby and Will Zimmerman for comments on drafts of this review.