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BOOKSHELF

Review: Awe in Search of Understanding

Though nonbelievers fault religion for its comforting simplicities, belief doesn't always make the world easier to understand. Andrew Stark reviews 'The Meaning of Belief' by Tim Crane.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/VETTA

By *Andrew Stark*

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Can atheists ever attain the kind of spiritual uplift that religion provides? Can this mundane world ever deliver the serenity offered by genuine belief in an eternal world beyond?

Yes, say many nonbelievers. The atheist thinker Sam Harris claims that he has attained (with intermittent boosts from psychotropics) a “beatific” and “egoless communion” with the “beauty of nature,” one that gives him a comfort and joy akin to a certain kind of religious feeling. Perhaps many of us—in moments when we are confronted with profound beauty—experience an awe of the cosmos so intense that we perceive ourselves merging into it, a part of the whole. But it will probably be a fleeting moment; most of us will find it difficult to achieve a steady sense of egoless communion in the drabness and drudgery of everyday life.

In “The Meaning of Belief,” the philosopher Tim Crane is less eager to investigate the religious-like feelings that atheists may experience than to challenge the assumption that belief brings consolation, let alone jubilation or rapture.

What defines religious belief? For Mr. Crane, it's the conviction that (in William James's words) an “unseen order” governs the universe—an order that is beyond cognition, perception or any other human faculty to fully grasp. This otherworldly aspect is one reason why belief must be accepted in a leap of faith, however much reasoning may be directed toward it afterward. An unseen order, Mr. Crane says, is common to all religious traditions: It is something beyond “what is encountered in experience and science . . . beyond our finite human understanding.”

The believer thus experiences belief not so much as truth but as meaning: an ultimate meaning that he can't specify because it is, by definition, beyond his ken. But a belief in meaning, Mr. Crane says, “is not always something that makes the world easier to understand,” though atheists often attack religion for its anodyne simplicity and easy comforts. “In fact,” Mr. Crane writes, belief “can make the world harder to understand—this is one lesson we can draw from the problem of inexplicable suffering and evil.” Or,

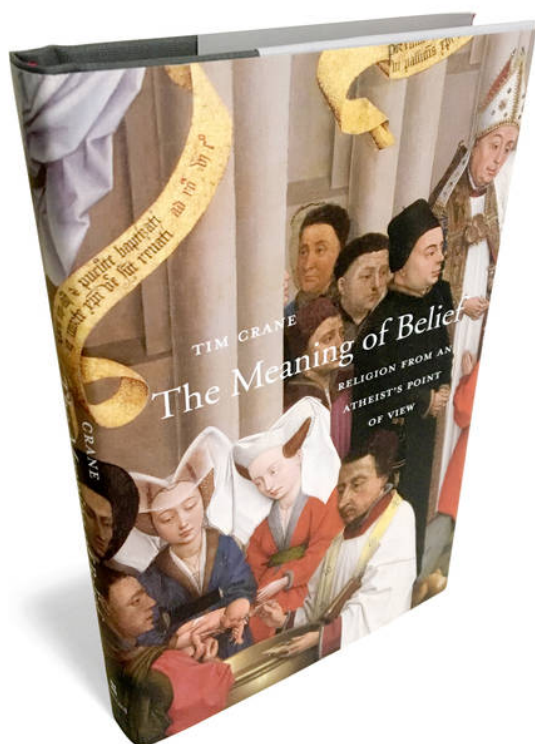


PHOTO: WSJ

 THE MEANING OF BELIEF

By Tim Crane

Harvard, 207 pages, \$24.95

one might add, death, another aspect of reality that may confound the capacities of even the most ardent believer. Only the saintly, Mr. Crane implies, can manage the religious struggle for comprehension successfully. For the ordinary believer, recurrent doubt will prevent “the kind of unproblematic solace in the face of death that many atheists think is part of the point of religious belief.”

Mr. Crane has other sharp observations to make about religion. Not for him the fashionable idea that one can mix and match to taste—a pinch of Christianity with a dollop of Judaism topped off with a drizzle of Mahayana Buddhism. Religious belief, he says, requires the repeated performance of rituals within an established communal setting. This stricture and

others—e.g., the need to stay loyal to one’s faith in the way “a faithful friend sticks with you in good times and bad”—seem to place religion out of the grasp of many who, these days, think of themselves as believers.

Taking Mr. Crane’s eat-your-spinach view of religion in the context of recent philosophical writing, you’d almost think that the original question should be turned on its head. Can believers, agonizingly wrestling with ultimate meaning and the quest to understand it, ever achieve the kind of Age of Aquarius uplift that atheists like Mr. Harris access simply through the awe they feel in the presence of natural beauty?

The answer would seem to be “no” or “only rarely,” but there’s a missing middle between these poles undiscussed by Mr. Crane: wonder. It is here that incongruent worldviews may overlap. As a noun, a wonder is something worthy of awe. As a verb (“I wonder”) it signifies the quest to understand. Both may be elements of religious experience, of course. But it’s precisely in taking the awe of which Mr. Harris speaks, and marrying it to the quest to understand that Mr. Crane discusses, that many scientists say they experience a kind of religious exhilaration. Awe, as the biologist Richard Dawkins tells us—whether provoked by something beautiful like a rainbow or unnerving like a black hole—is what instills in scientists their thirst to understand.

For scientists, Mr. Crane emphasizes, meaning follows understanding, and not the other way around. They test hypotheses and assumptions (whether empirically or through mathematical reasoning) before accepting whatever meaning they discover. And meaning, again, is the operative word. As Mr. Crane notes, scientists are never quite sure that they have hit on the truth. What they discover is, rather, formulations that make ever better sense of reality—until new formulations prove to be better still. Religion and science, Mr. Crane argues, are fundamentally different enterprises, so much so that,

contrary to what some militant atheists hope, science will never replace religion. Even so, they need not be seen as utterly alien realms, without any chance of rapport or mutual sympathy.

There's another pertinent word that Mr. Crane neglects: numinous. Rooted in the Latin "numen," meaning divinity, it refers to the halo of impenetrable meaning we sense whenever we feel moved by nature, whether in its jaw-droppingly awesome forms or in the quietly everyday. Einstein spoke of "something we cannot penetrate." What is that ineffable "something"? It's the conviction of an ultimate meaning of the sort Mr. Crane discusses but not one that abides in an inaccessible world beyond. Instead it emerges, as a whole does from the sum of its parts, out of the sun and stars and sea and sierra: the very things into which Age of Aquarius types hope themselves to somehow merge.

Scientists, and not just philosophers, are helping bring nonbelievers closer to believers. And that's a good thing. After all, as Mr. Crane says, they're going to be together for a long time: perhaps an eternity.

Mr. Stark is the author of "The Consolations c

Making Sense of Death."

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Search Of Understanding.'

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