INTRODUCTION

Against Belief?

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Abstract: In this introduction we provide a genealogy of anthropological writings on belief and discuss the politics of using the term in cross-cultural contexts. We summarize the contributions to this issue and argue for the virtues of writing ‘against’—rather than ‘with’—the term in ethnographic texts. The article concludes with reflections on the way anthropological discussions of belief have expressed wider assumptions about the representation of culture.

Keywords: belief, Christianity, culture, experience, magic, religion, representation, science

In Vancouver, where the workshop that gave rise to this collection was held,¹ one of the participants suddenly went down with a bad lower-back muscle spasm. Back spasms are one of the areas where biomedicine has little to offer, other than painkillers, muscle relaxants, and weeks of rest. It was therefore decided to send for a doctor of Chinese medicine. While burning herbs around the acupuncture needles stuck into the patient’s back (a practice known as moxibustion), the doctor explained what the problem was: “Your energy flow through this area is blocked, and the overall energy in the area is low. This is what I believe. The remedies I use now will make the energy flow, and then the body will restore itself. This is what our belief is, in Chinese medicine.”

Coming from studies of widely different forms of religion, we (Lindquist and Coleman) had been dissatisfied with the term ‘belief’ as a general analytical tool in studying phenomena usually classed as religious. Of course, this sense that the term ‘belief’ is inadequate is by no means new among scholars of religion. Rodney Needham’s (1972) call to abandon the term has since been echoed by several convincing voices. A preliminary formulation (later prudently modified) of our summary for the present volume advocated putting the

term ‘belief’ to rest once and for all, since we saw it as conceptually misleading and ideologically dubious. Yet in many of the papers presented at the Vancouver workshop, the concept of ‘belief’, employed in myriad ways, turned out to be alive and well. And then, outside our own academic framework, here was a practitioner of a system clearly alternative to the Western one—although by now well recognized and firmly integrated with it—self-consciously referring to his own premises and instructions as based on ‘beliefs’. What did these developments say about the grounds of our project and, broader still, about the social life of concepts that display the ability to establish and maintain deep roots within our academic discourse even as they migrate between domains of use?

We ‘believe’ that the encounter with the Chinese doctor, as well as the evidence for the continued vitality of the term ‘belief’ in our own workshop, should be seen as encouragements for, rather than challenges to, the basis of our collection. Consider the doctor. Note how he felt it necessary to explain ‘our belief’; but did he think that his explanation would help the healing process itself, or was it more a product of an encounter between a patient and a healer from overlapping but distinct discursive worlds? And would other representatives of the broad field of Chinese medicine have agreed with his adumbration of ‘their’ beliefs? Consider also the academics contributing to a session that was entitled ‘Against Belief’ (without so much as a question mark in the original). Did they show that, in practice, the concept of belief is too much a part of a largely Western academic vocabulary to be abandoned? Or that it has become too significant a part of many informants’ understanding of themselves to be removed from our theoretical vocabulary?

We do not anticipate laying the concept of belief finally to rest in this collection. But we consider that the task of examining and questioning many of the uses of the term remains important within studies of religion and beyond. Our strategy in this collection is in part inductive, since we juxtapose and trace the ways in which authors as well as informants deploy it in analyses of different religious contexts. However, in attempting to promote skepticism among our contributors, we have been proceeding under the assumption that the concept of belief is generally good to think ‘against’ rather than ‘with’. We remain convinced of this view (hesitating to call it a ‘belief’), even as we trace some of the rather distinct ways in which the term has been deployed and indeed attacked in past and present social scientific writings.

Genealogies

E. B. Tylor’s famous definition of culture ([1871] 1920: 1) saw it as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom.” So belief was seen here as an inherent part of the cultural lives of humans. Tylor also used the term more specifically to provide a minimal definition of religion—“beliefs in Spiritual Beings.” The salient point here is Tylor’s intellectualism, his prioritizing of belief over ritual (contra Robertson Smith), which revealed both his Quaker roots and a post-Enlightenment emphasis on religion as a cognitive

system. Religious beliefs not only could be seen as means to explain the natural world but also could ultimately be proved to be ‘true’ or ‘false’.²

For Tambiah (1990: 43), Tylor “had no feeling for what religion, particularly public, organized, ritualized religion, meant to the worshippers themselves.” In this respect, Tylor contrasted markedly with Durkheim, who writes from a rather different cultural, intellectual, and religious tradition. Certainly, Durkheim’s *Elementary Forms* retained assumptions about the conceptual and ideational aspects of religion, with beliefs seen as coherent collective representations through which an understanding of the world could be mediated (Ruel 1997: 9). But Durkheim’s characteristic binarism also saw him juxtaposing beliefs with rites, ‘states of opinion’ with ‘modes of action’. If religion consisted, by definition, of both, Durkheim was critical of theorists who saw ritual merely as the external translation of inward states. Just as Durkheim’s approach fed into later intellectualist impulses, so it also supplied the theoretical impetus for an anthropological tradition that has seen ritual as a behavioral surrogate for religion (*ibid.*).

Of course, other disciplinary ancestors could be invoked here, but the point is to see in these early debates some of the questions that have continued to plague analysts of religion in the subsequent century. Can we assume intellectual coherence in the religious ‘systems’ of the society of others—and, indeed, of our own? Can beliefs be described as having ‘functions’, whether explanatory, moral, or some other kind? And if it is hard enough to establish the relationship between belief and rite—whether hierarchical, complementary, or mutually exclusive—how can such terms also be applied to assumptions about religion as an ‘inner state’ as well as an ‘outer form’?

We see some of these questions raised yet again in a more recent debate over the nature of belief and its relationship to religion as a whole. Geertz (1966) complicates and nuances our ethnographic understanding of belief by arguing that it cannot be seen as a homogeneous characteristic of an individual, like place of residence or kinship position. Rather, he maintains (*ibid.*: 79): “Religious belief in the midst of ritual, where it engulfs the total person, transporting him [*sic*], so far as he is concerned, into another mode of existence, and religious belief as the pale, remembered reflection of that experience in the midst of everyday life are not precisely the same thing.” This sense of the experience of religious belief as context-dependent can be used, says Geertz, to reconcile the apparent differences between Lévy-Bruhl and Malinowski on the nature of ‘native thought’. More generally, we see Geertz placing belief in the midst of ritual, with rites providing temporal periods of particular vividness for beliefs and religious symbols. Yet he also insists (*ibid.*: 74) that religious belief cannot be seen as involving pure induction from experience, but rather a prior acceptance of authority which transforms that experience. Hence, Asad (1993: 125) contends that Geertz’s treatment of religious belief seems a rather modern, privatized one “to the extent that it emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as constituting activity in the world.” A theological insistence on the primacy of meaning, without taking into account the processes by which meanings are constructed, appears to result (*ibid.*: 43).

Behind such a critique are wider worries (Asad 1993: 28ff.) that Geertz and others see religion as having an autonomous, transcultural essence, divorced from specific domains of power. Even within Christianity, argues Asad, radically divergent conceptions can be shown historically to have existed. In modern society, where the only legitimate space allowed to Christianity is supposedly the right to individual belief, religious apologists (*ibid.*: 125) tend to regard belief not as the conclusion to a knowledge process but as its precondition. The claim is therefore to a particular state of mind and conviction rather than to a corpus of practical knowledge. But according to Asad, knowledge and belief would not have been considered to be so clearly at odds in medieval Christianity, so that belief would have been seen as built on the knowledge provided by theological doctrine, canon law, Church courts, and so on: “Familiarity with all such (religious) knowledge was a precondition for normal social life, and belief (embodied in practice and discourse) an orientation for effective activity in it, whether on the part of the religious clergy, the secular clergy, or the laity” (*ibid.*).

Whether or not we agree with Asad’s depiction of medieval Christianity, we see in this debate some familiar quandaries: What is the relationship between belief and the ordering of existence? Is belief a necessarily individualized and internalized phenomenon? How do we understand the connections between belief and experience, whether the latter is constituted by ritual or by ordinary activity? Finally, there is the seemingly eternal problem of whether it is possible to see belief as helping to constitute a universal conception of religion (van der Veer 1997: 5).

Dismantling Belief

So far, then, we have begun to explore some of the difficulties of the term ‘belief’ when viewed historically and in relation to general theories of religion. Needham’s (1972) treatise adds another dimension to the debate by going through the range of possible uses of the concept: as a common word in the English language; as a psychological term designating an inner state; as an identifying peg, signifying belonging to a religious institution; and as a basic concept in Western philosophical tradition. The problem, as he presents it, is multi-faceted: the category of belief as we use it is a confluence of different concepts and meanings, and the analyst adopting the category must first be clear about which of them she or he sets out to employ. Needham argues that belief, understood as a common psychological category, as an inner state, should be distinguished from “received ideas to which a people subscribe” (*ibid.*: 2), from dogmas, orthodoxies, or collective representations that an observer can conjecture from his or her observations (we are back here to inner-outer distinctions). Scholars should at least attempt to clarify what this allegedly psychological state of belief is all about—a project that is distinct but connected with other questions, namely, what the status of these representations is within the given social context, what their role is within different cultural domains, and how people relate to these representations. For example, in the Russia of

late Soviet times, the imminent victory of Communism was a foundational 'belief', according to the official ideology, while among broad circles of people of different social strata it was a subject of cynical joking and a token of the lies and hypocrisy that were characteristic of the regime. Similarly, a teenage boy in a modern European country, whose devout Catholic parents take him to church every Sunday, might verbally state his belief in 'God Father Almighty' in front of his elders, while proclaiming himself an atheist to his friends.

The common usages of the term 'belief' are confusing. They may concern a cognitive stance, but also an attitude rather emotional in character. As French anthropologist Jean Pouillon points out ([1979] 1982), 'belief', as it is used in English and French (and also in German), conjoins three usages. First, there is belief in the existence of someone or something, acceptance of a fact on a cognitive level. Second, there is internalization of a statement (or, as Pouillon says, 'representation') as one's own, 'held true'. In such cases, people tend to talk about 'knowing' or 'seeing' rather than 'believing'. This usage presupposes a process of socialization in which some conditions are staged that provide a certain experience, as in conversion or in adopting new cultural systems (see, e.g., the Western neo-shamans described in Lindquist [1998]). Third, 'believing in'—that is, putting confidence or trust in or having faith in—someone or something can designate a qualification of a bond and pertains to emotion more than to cognition. The second and third usages are connected: having confidence in a doctor entails holding true what the doctor says in terms of the mechanisms of disease and the techniques of healing that the doctor stands for.

Furthermore, 'believing' as a cognitive stance is itself ambiguous. While believing is indeed 'holding true', the verb 'to believe' expresses doubt as well as assurance, affirmation of statement as well as distancing from it. 'To believe' is to state a conviction, but with the added nuance 'I am not sure'. To state a belief is to open a possibility of doubt. As Pouillon ([1979] 1982: 1) puts it: "[I]t is an unbeliever who believes that the believer believes in the existence of God." For the believer, the existence of God is not 'believed' but 'perceived'.

According to Pouillon, in the Christian 'belief in God', the three aspects of the verb are conjoined: the existence of God is held as true, the relationship is marked as that of trust and confidence (faith), and God's word is accepted as dogma (credo).³ On the other hand, one might recognize the existence of the Devil (i.e., believe that the Devil does exist), but one would not put trust in the Devil unless one is a Satanist. One can say that one believes in a friend, but while this implies trust and perhaps an assertion of the friend's potentialities, it is not a belief in the friend's existence. In the latter case, the friend's existence is an unquestionable matter of perception and knowledge rather than of belief—but so is the existence of God for a devout Christian. Pouillon's insight is that the distinction that we usually make between belief and knowledge is a consequence of another, more basic ontological distinction between what we call the 'natural world' (the abode of humans, animals, plants) and the 'world beyond' (the abode of God, deities, spirits). But this distinction is a product of Western civilization and is not upheld in many other cultures, where the spirits

are as much a part of the natural world as animals, plants, and human beings. This observation is true for the Dangleat, the people Pouillon studied, as well as for the Tuvans described by Lindquist in this volume.

The etymology of the word ‘belief’ says much about its semantics, and in this respect Emile Benveniste’s *Indo-European Language and Society* (1973) is instructive. Pouillon points out that in this book ‘belief’ is discussed not in the section on religion but in that on ‘economic obligations’, for Benveniste sees the original meaning of this word in the credit that is accorded and should be returned. Thus, to believe someone is to grant this person or institution loyalty and commitment with the expectation of reciprocation in the form of support and protection. Faith and trust in gods and oracles—transferred to the use of ‘belief’ in the Old Testament—strongly suggest this connotation. This trust in someone also implies giving credit to what the person says—as in the Hebrew *mn* in the sense of ‘trust in an oracle’ (Ruel 1997)—and thus the meaning is transposed from trust in the person or institution to acceptance of their statements and, further, to acceptance of representations of what they state. And all such representations, Pouillon claims, are part of a more or less integrated and articulated larger system of representations. Hence, by accepting a certain representation, one commits oneself to a certain institutional structure and adopts a certain identity. This is the case with many Christian believers, for whom belief is first and foremost loyalty and commitment. Thus, it is not fortuitous that Christianity—an institution and ideology that is foundational for European civilization—is based on conjoining these meanings of belief. An affective attitude (trust) is fused with the cognitive move (the acceptance of contents), but both take on a moral stance (the attribution of commitment). In Christianity, “trust in God is a basis of credo, a group of statements that becomes the object of belief” (Needham 1972: 39). However, acceptance of a representation based on trust in the institutional system of which this representation is part is no less a mechanism of what in the West figures as ‘knowledge’: we ‘know’ that diseases are caused by micro-organisms because we trust (have faith) in the institution of biomedicine, not because we have conducted the requisite experiments ourselves. By contrast, the medical knowledge of the people we study is rendered as ‘belief’, thereby indicating distancing (see Good 1994).

Thus, in this view, the conjoining in one term of three semantic aspects of belief (to recognize as a fact, to accept as a representation, and to have confidence or trust in the source) is achieved in cultures that have roots in religions of a certain kind, namely, in those where the object of belief is located in a different order of reality than that of the world of creation. Such a separation of realities introduces the supernatural (whether as illusion or as other reality) as a place that contravenes natural law and where other epistemological rules apply. In the natural world, reality can be known. It can be an object of calculations, predictions, or experiments that can prove to be wrong and are open to revision, following rules of logic and ratiocination. But for Pouillon, natural law is our own notion, not that of other peoples to whom we abusively attribute it. As noted above, in cultures like Tuva—originally nomadic pastoralists of taiga and steppe—as well as for many other non-Western peoples,

‘gods and spirits’ are as much an indisputable part of the ‘natural world’ as trees, plants, and stones.⁴

The point is reminiscent of Lévi-Bruhl, who speaks of a fuzzy line that other cultures draw between experience and belief: “The experience that we distinguish as mystical is [for other peoples] as real as the other, and has for them an unchallenged validity” (in Needham 1972: 172). Such reality is known to these people through experiences of certain kinds, staged through certain practices and schooled through certain habits. On the other hand, the Western notion of experience is marked by certain mental habits elaborated by generations of philosophers, psychologists, logicians, and scientists. In their hands it has become, above all, a function of intelligence. The essential role of experience, as it has been described and analyzed in this tradition, “is to inform the sentient and thinking subject of the properties of creatures and objects with which it places him in relation ... and to permit the human mind, which reflects on these data and on their conditions, to construct a representation of the world. The general notion of experience that has been thus developed is above all ‘cognitive’” (Lévi-Bruhl, quoted in *ibid.*: 173). Thus, as indicated above, non-Western people’s empirical knowledge of integrated reality is rendered by us as ‘belief’, while our own acceptance of institutional representations of, for example, science is seen as ‘knowledge’. Yet in using these terms in the way that we do, we have already constructed a hierarchy of value between distinct epistemological systems.

The incompatibility between, and the confusion generated by, mystical experiences pertaining to the other reality (the object of belief belonging to the realm of religion) and the cognitive experiences of this reality (the object of knowledge belonging to science) obscures our understanding of those persons in our own society who refer to themselves as ‘believers’, for example, Christians. It is important to realize, as Christian theologians tell us, that the core of Christian beliefs is not an intellectual acceptance of a set of propositions held as true. Instead, it is loving trust in the person of Jesus Christ. This is more than an emotional attitude—it is a mode of existence. The experience of communion with Christ entails a loyalty to the ideology, a commitment to an institution, and an adherence to a certain lifestyle. Christian belief is not an essentially cognitive entity; rather, it incorporates affective experience, the experience of faith that connotes belief, subjectively appropriated.

Here the history of the concept of belief again comes into view, as outlined by Malcolm Ruel (1997: 100) in his examination of “the monumental peculiarity of Christian ‘belief.’”⁵ Ruel’s approach is to examine Christian understandings of the word at various phases of the religion’s history. He notes (*ibid.*: 101ff.) that the original Greek word (*pistis*) expressed the idea of trust, denoting conduct that honored an agreement or bond. It thus had a social orientation and acquired a religious use at an early date, when ‘to believe’ the gods or an oracle expressed both confidence in divine forces (in their veracity or ability to promote welfare) and obedience to them. Only in the apostolic writings of the New Testament was there added a sense of conversion and a common conviction that distinguished and united Christians as a community. The specifically Christian assertion that an event (the Resurrection) had taken place emerged

and was turned into an explicit proposition. Thus, Ruel (*ibid.*: 40) asserts, “A distinction made frequently today is between ‘belief in’ (trust in) and ‘belief that’ (propositional belief). The distinction may clear our minds today but it confuses history, for the point about Christian belief ... is that it was both at once.” Over time, the sense and definition of belief marked out not only Christians from non-Christians but also true believers from heretics.⁶

We can see, then, how in Christian history “[t]rust in a personified God becomes conviction about a certain event, the Christ-event of history, becomes an initiatory declaration, becomes a corporately declared orthodoxy, becomes an inwardly organizing experience, becomes values common to all men” (Ruel 1997: 109). All of these connotations are implied when we label orthodoxies, received ideas, collective representations, or ontological foundations of other people’s worlds as ‘beliefs’. It is these implications that make the use of ‘belief’ as applied to others so pernicious, because it carries certain significant and limiting presuppositions. Ruel lists some such fallacious implications: that people’s ideas are necessarily formulated as coherent orthodoxies; that people are committed to them and hold them unquestioningly; that these ideas are experienced as inner states; that they form grounds of personal commitment or group identity and can be cited as explanations of personal and group behavior; that the referents of people’s words and behavior are imaginative projections rather than substantive ‘reality’.⁷ On the other hand, ‘belief’ as trust, as conviction about the rightness of one’s actions and adherence to one’s affiliations and identifications, is rather more recognizable across cultures (see also Robbins 2007). The recent controversies regarding drawings of Muhammad in Scandinavia and elsewhere show that both individuals and various groups, from transnational communities of the faithful to nation-states, can go to great lengths to show that they ‘stand for’ their ‘values’, ranging from the purity of religious symbols to the central importance of freedom of speech.

The Politics of Depicting Belief

Contained in what we have said so far has been an argument about the representational politics of talking about others (and the self) as believers. On the one hand, there is the implication that ethnographic description has sometimes been guilty of creating a kind of false proximity to or kinship with Christian assumptions about the world, translating other ‘faiths’ into Western categories. For instance, this was the dilemma originally faced by Ruel (1997: 5) when trying to describe Kuria religion, which simply did not fit with Western, Christian notions of supernaturalist speculation. On the other hand, the discourse of belief can create a particular form of distance, implying that ‘their’ beliefs are mere delusions⁸ in comparison with ‘our’ usually secular (Stewart 2001) knowledge of how the world functions, or assuming that a homogeneous, hegemonic worldview prevails in the culture of others in contrast to the heterogeneous, contested, nuanced character of culture in our own society.

Examining the politics of representation of belief can take on particular piquancy when applied to Western contexts. Good (1994), for instance, argues that science and religious fundamentalism actually share a particular style of thought, based on their respective concepts of belief (Bowie 2000: 244–245). In contrast to an assumed pre-Enlightenment condition of lack of alternatives, both medical scientists and conservative Christians are seen as using a concept of belief in the sense of choosing between two options, one true and one false. Or again, Crapanzano (2000) provocatively juxtaposes Christian fundamentalists and a certain style of doing American law, arguing that both engage in forms of literalism. In both examples, the rhetorical as well as the analytical power of the argument comes from confounding the assumed contrast between rational and non-rational discourse (between knowledge and belief) in the West, thus challenging the politics of distance alluded to above. These cases also disrupt the assumption that beliefs need be confined to the private, internal, individual sphere of society.⁹

If it has become difficult to sustain the loaded image of beliefs as delusions (or at least unwarranted assumptions) owned by others, the very sense that a given person or group either does or does not subscribe to a set of beliefs has also been challenged in more recent work.¹⁰ Anderson (2003: 124), exploring conversion to Christianity in Iceland, challenges the theological exclusivity implied in the assumption that people must abandon one set of beliefs to substitute another. Luhrmann's (1989) depiction of witchcraft in contemporary England involves a discussion of how informants come gradually to be committed to a potentially controversial 'religion'. Suspension of disbelief may come first (*ibid.*: 251), followed by a long and ambiguous process of 'interpretive drift' that does not rely on any specific threshold of conversion but rather involves a largely unacknowledged shift in the interpretation of events—"a ragged co-evolution of intellectual habits and phenomenological involvement" (*ibid.*: 313).

Even well-established, mainstream Christianity can provide deeply problematic contexts for the depiction of belief. In his analysis of the 'cultural system' of a contemporary Swedish church, Stromberg (1986) is precisely worried about the assumption that believers might be assumed to share religious culture in an unproblematic, consensual way. Happy to note the way that the mentalistic connotations of belief can be avoided by terms such as 'symbols' and 'meaning systems', Stromberg (*ibid.*: 89) traces the way Durkheim's distinction between belief and rite has been replaced in anthropology by more of a Geertzian focus on the interplay between symbol and action. Yet even here, says Stromberg, suggestions of interplay and mutual influence still imply the possibility of their separation. He prefers to deploy a language of religious commitment that mediates distinctions between belief and ritual, thought and action. It is not that church members can be seen as attempting to bring their behavior into congruence with their beliefs; rather, they appropriate common images in personally meaningful processes of commitment. The experience of commitment to a symbol is an identification that often takes the form of an explicitly physical, often pre-linguistic merging of an image of faith and an image of self. 'Believers' continually discover the core image of salvation in terms that are profoundly meaningful to them as individuals.

Beyond Belief?

So Needham dislikes belief because of its philosophical and semantic imprecision; Ruel is worried by its Christian assumptions, as well as the shifting meanings attributed to the term over time; and Stromberg is one of a host of recent authors who, in various ways, have attempted to collapse belief into forms of embodied or at least non-linguistic practice. Recently, David Morgan (2005) has applied the 'embodiment' approach to developing a perspective on belief as visual practice—part of the 'sacred gaze' that he describes.

At this stage, it might seem that all that is left for us is to reiterate Needham's conclusion of more than 30 years ago. 'Belief', in the meaning of assumption and expectation, as well as of commitment to what is assumed, is firmly part of the English language and is unlikely to disappear from common parlance. People will continue to apply it to themselves, with pride and passion. Even in secular contexts people are prepared to fight for the causes in which they 'believe'. However, hardly any additional argument is needed to sustain the claim that 'belief', as an analytic concept, is useless. "I do indeed urge," writes Needham, "that in ethnographic reports, or in comparative epistemology, the use of the word should be quite abandoned" (1972: 192).

But what then of the Chinese doctor who presents the foundational categories of his medical and cosmological system as his 'beliefs'? What of the southern Zambian informants of Thomas Kirsch (2004) who constantly move between the many Christian denominations of the area in search of healing by the Holy Spirit, claiming that one must 'believe' in order for this healing to be effective? If our interlocutors use the term conceptually, it would certainly be informative to analyze the contexts in which the term is employed and the meanings implied by this use. The Chinese doctor is obviously a person who has to navigate multiple objective realities of today's multicultural Canada, and he does this with confidence and ease. His patients mix without compunction the remedies of biomedicine with those of Chinese medicine; Chinese herbal medications with muscle relaxants and painkillers; acupuncture and moxibustion with alternative Western systems, such as osteopathy, and perhaps also with Japanese shiatsu, Indian Ayurveda, and more. In doing so, the patients often do not need to have any beliefs; the only thing they care about is efficiency of practice. Practitioners of these systems have to accept this state of affairs, and in order to show their acceptance, they mark their own system as one among several, while at the same time indicating their adherence to it by using the term 'belief'. This subtle linguistic operation, of whose semantic and ideological implications the Chinese doctor was most likely not consciously aware, is permitted by the genealogy and history of use of the term 'belief' in the language that has become their medium of communication. Meanwhile, for the people of southern Zambia, assent to specific propositions (belief as 'holding true') is irrelevant (Kirsch 2004). However, every time they engage with a practice, they must do it with conviction, with trust in the healer, without reservation or doubt. Or again, Catholic charismatics or adherents of an evangelical church would use the term 'belief', but, as some contributions to this

volume illustrate, they will mean something different from what anthropologists mean when they describe ‘beliefs of traditional peoples’. People we study would use different native terms for different aspects of belief, and the way these terms are combined and juxtaposed in their linguistic use in the context of their practices and social institutions is likely to be telling. Above all, and definitively so, we should ourselves be reflexive—skeptical—about the ways we use concepts such as ‘belief’ and ‘experience’ in our own writing.¹¹

The Essays

How, then, do the contributors to this volume indicate the pitfalls as well as the merits of the term ‘belief’ as it is both observed in ethnographic use and deployed in ethnographic analysis? In the following, we present the editors’ take on the essays, but for the most part we do not refer to the end pieces by Hicks and Handelman, since the latter are intended as comments on (and certainly not mere summaries of) the contributions.¹²

Stephen Glazier, speaking about the Orisa cult in Trinidad, perhaps uses the notion of belief in the most straightforward way—as people’s ideas about the world. But his ethnography questions the assumption of ‘their beliefs’ as definite and shared local ontologies. What Glazier calls levels and degrees of belief and unbelief are complex involvements in the social world where spiritual beings are present through practices and commitments. Trinidad—with its multitude of denominations, cults, and practices, between which people move and shift—is reminiscent of the African context described by Kirsch. The decisive factor is not dogma or creed; rather, it is the practical and experiential efficacy of individual practitioners and episodes of practice. ‘Belief’ in Orisa involves a range of attitudes, from familial love and passionate devotion to ‘recognition’ (or its weaker version, ‘acknowledgment’), to the branding of spirits as manifestations of Satan, or even to downright rejection from materialist unbelievers. The use of ‘belief’ here as a social, practical, and experiential attitude is perhaps justified precisely because it allows us to distinguish between and analyze the multitude of shades and varieties of these stances.

Andrew Buckser, too, presents an exploration of the often highly charged varieties of belief that might be involved and invoked in plural religious contexts. In doing so, he provides an intriguing example of how the people we study often struggle with broadly the same questions as anthropologists usually do: what is the meaning of belief (here defined as an orientation toward ideas that constitute the core of a religious system), and what is its place in the religious system in question? He and some of his informants are primarily interested in how religion defines belief (rather than how belief defines religion), what it means for adherents of religion to believe, and how modes of belief relate to political processes that form the context of religion. We see also how Buckser (in the tradition of Ruel, Asad, and others) uses history to show how timeless models of the relationship of belief to religious experience are to be problematized. Writing about Jews in Denmark in the early nineteenth and

twenty-first centuries, he traces changing meanings of belief in the religious life of the Jewish community at these two historical moments. This question is especially interesting in Judaism, which, it has often been assumed, is a religion of practices rather than beliefs. Buckser shows, however, that centrality of belief was and remains a bone of contention within this community. For some nineteenth-century Danish Jews, tradition dwelt in rituals carrying out the Law. However, for reformers of the time, whose aim was to engage with the larger society, a more intellectual involvement with the contents of faith was seen as crucial in making Judaism a religious denomination on a par with others in the Denmark of the time. In the contemporary situation, however, the meaning of belief is broadly opposite to that posited by earlier reformers: for modern Jews in Denmark, the essence of Judaism is to be found in cultural identity. Religious affiliations are located in the private realm, and belief can come close to an atavistic anti-modernism. Overall, Buckser might be said to give us a provocative rereading and transformation of an older, Durkheimian paradigm. Belief does not ‘mirror’ community in a simple sense, but the changing nature of debates over the *role* of belief can be linked to shifts in the social and cultural location of the religious community.

It is widely accepted that ‘belief’ is a defining feature of historical Christianity and is especially central in Protestantism.¹³ In his study of American evangelicals, Omri Elisha confirms that they are indeed strong exemplars and staunch defenders of belief. He shows, however, that they do not stress propositional assent as consistently or uniformly as one might expect—indeed, they may not be quite the ‘believers’ they appear to be at first sight. The core of their religious (inter)subjectivity is in a sense beyond belief, in an ontological condition of faith that is related to but distinct from doctrinal orthodoxy. Faith for these evangelicals is more than putting trust in a higher power, engendering passionate loyalties, and changing ways of life (according to evangelicals, motives of the human heart are anyway inherently sinful). The evangelical conception of faith stems from a posited transcendence that encompasses body and mind, emotion and propositional reasoning, and leads to a radical reconstitution of both self and—potentially—society.

Continuing the theme of embodiment, Jon and Hildi Mitchell argue that much criticism of ‘belief’ stems from a narrowly logocentric understanding of the term. Instead, they urge us to see belief not as a categorical and linguistic phenomenon, but as a bodily and experiential one. They criticize the polarity that has long informed the study of religion (to a degree reflected even in some contributions to this volume) in which Christianity is seen as exclusively or ideally ‘transcendent’, as opposed to the ‘immanent’ orientation of non-Western religions. Rather, they propose to reclaim the notion of belief as a unit for cross-cultural analysis and as a universal category of religious experience (without taking us back to broad Geertzian notions of ‘meaning’). They attempt to forego both belief as faith, as commitment to a set of values or to a community (‘belief in’), and belief as a cognitive state of assenting to a set of propositions (‘belief that’). They then go on to redefine belief as a process through which non-linguistic knowledge is produced and reproduced

to generate a distinctive orientation in the world. They show that the practices of acquisition of a religious attitude (what they propose to call ‘belief’) do not describe or represent states of being ‘religious’ (or ‘being a believer’) but rather generate or actively reconstitute them.

Political and epistemological concerns come together in two complementary contributions to this volume that relate to shamanic practices. In her piece on the revival of shamanic tradition in post-Soviet Siberia, Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer finds the term ‘belief’ useful for highlighting the multiplicity of worldviews and epistemologies in the chaotic era of post-Soviet transformation. She makes a distinction between ‘beliefs’, which she defines as more or less coherent native systems of thought, and the more eclectic, idiosyncratic, and personally satisfying convictions that she calls ‘faith’. People are more reflexive about belief, while faith involves stronger personal commitment, which does not, however, prevent people from experiencing doubt, changes of loyalties, and outright rejection of beliefs. Changing social contexts make for multiple levels of devotion, acceptance, and withdrawal, resonating with what Glazer observes for Orisa followers in Trinidad (and with Hicks’s East Timor ethnography, which is presented later in the volume). What Balzer calls ‘fragmented epistemologies’ during post-colonial, multiple-power regimes emerge in competition with each other and in interaction with skeptical, indifferent, or romanticizing outsiders. Fragile faith varies between individuals in form and content. It becomes rekindled or extinguished, forming shifting communities, but never consolidates into anything uniform or monolithic that could be seen as a new Siberian ‘religion’.

While part of Balzer’s assessment is that we should never take for granted that gods and spirits are an indisputable part of the natural world of the people we study, Lindquist argues just this point in her article on another Siberian nation. She stresses that in the case she studied, non-human beings (as human consociates and as part of the natural order) have an ontological character—that is, they are more or less taken for granted as part of people’s existence. This does not imply that people cognitively ‘believe’ in spirits, or that lay people are uniformly committed to social relations with these beings, as shamans are. At stake here are certain practices in which people participate as a matter of course, as social beings in a particular cultural environment. These practices, partly revived as a newly found ‘tradition’, yet deeply rooted, constitute a certain type of cosmos, a natural-social universe, where lay people, ritual specialists, and non-human beings interact with each other according to their places in this cosmology. Although people’s attitudes toward both the practices and their underlying ideas and attitudes (what we might label ‘beliefs’) may differ situationally and in relation to social strata, as described in Glazer’s article and as succinctly summarized later by Hicks (this volume), the premises for this cosmology are shared on a much deeper level than the cognitive and emotional stances captured by such terms as ‘belief’ or ‘faith’.

With Mira Amiras’s account of Esalen, we move from the ‘indigenously’ shamanic to the self-consciously spiritual. People described in this study are contemporary, middle-class Westerners, whose aim is ‘meta-normal’ transformations of

body and mind, an ‘extraordinary experience’ to be achieved by ‘practices’ in the midst of everyday life. In common with other seekers of ‘alternative spirituality’, the practitioners described by Amiras are careful to demarcate their distance from everything that can be construed as religious. They insist that their practices are ‘desacralized’, devoid of religious doctrine and requirements of belief, stripped of everything magical, mystical, or paranormal. As a participant researcher, Amiras poses the question of whether belief, which she defines as both a cognitive and emotional attitude, is necessary or at least conducive to achieving the desired result of ‘extraordinary transformations’. Her answer is that belief is irrelevant here: what counts is a disciplined practice for its own sake, without ‘attachment’ to the end result (another way of putting it is ‘to surrender’ to whatever is going to happen). Believers, she claims, tend to downplay the practice, waiting for the grace to descend, and they can fail just as well as ‘unbelievers’, who discard the possibility of the ‘extraordinary’ from the start. Instead of holding a belief, marred by its association with organized religions, practitioners are expected to have an open heart/mind, in addition to discipline and devotion to practice. As in several other cases discussed in this book, here belief as a cognitive/emotional attitude is less relevant to understanding what people do than are embodied practices within shared ontological and cosmological assumptions. The latter are important, as Amiras shows in her discussion of the ‘strangeness curve’. It could be argued that ontology and cosmology are both roundabout ways to grasp what we conventionally call beliefs. If so, these are perhaps less blunt and more sophisticated instruments of analysis.

Koen Stroeken’s piece also highlights issues of reflexivity and self-consciousness in belief and, in doing so, helps to place our debates within a classic—indeed, foundational—set of anthropological concerns: the old triad of science, religion, and magic. Offering another answer to the oft-posed question of why science and religion can co-exist while both are hostile to magic, he suggests that religion and science are based on what he calls ‘believed beliefs’ in their propositions. In both epistemological practices there is an act of volition, a performative step toward the stance of ‘believing’, the ardent commitment to the system of thought. Stroeken thus considers both science and religion as orthodoxies, which assert their propositions in the face of doubt and treat dissenting views as heresy (cf. Good 1994). Magic (as Stroeken observed it among the Sukuma of Tanzania), on the other hand, is not based on knowledge or belief. Instead, magical practices are founded on hybrid epistemologies, integrating opposing views and possibilities of not knowing. Magical recipes do not posit propositions as true or false; rather, they have interactive, expressive, therapeutic purposes. One of the many implications of Stroeken’s argument is that he is able to present a pluralism and open-texturedness that is not annexable by Western discourses of the postmodern. Sukuma pluralists engage in a disjunctive capacity that allows opposite views to co-exist.

As we have seen, belief as an analytical tool seems to die hard, and it can sometimes be useful in illuminating complex realities. As a concept, it surely works best when explored alongside other concepts that can shed light on the

nature of local realities involving representations we traditionally associate with religion. For instance, experience and practice, understood as embodied phenomena, seem to be important, although (as Stroeken points out) we must not assume that these terms can give us unmediated access to a bogus objectivity. Other concepts should emerge as we go about analyzing our ethnographies, tracing the social work that these terms do as they move between various discursive spheres, as they are employed by different agencies, and as they change over time in historical contexts.

Our predecessors have spilled much ink in order to convince us to discard belief as an analytical concept, yet the qualities of living language, as well as deeply ingrained habits of thought, show this to be well-nigh impossible. At least, then, we should try to complicate and historicize our own disciplinary commitments to dogmas of language use. Let us therefore conclude with presenting one form of historicization, a brief and final reference to the use of 'belief' in the culture of anthropology itself. Robbins (2007) notes how much ethnographic description has relied on a conversion of propositional accounts of belief into the third person: the 'X' are said to 'believe' this or that, and such beliefs not only distinguish 'them' from 'us' but also somehow constitute the core of 'their' culture. The unease that we might now feel with such depictions of culture is likely to emerge from, among other things, a worry over the attribution of culture to others in a form that seems both unproblematically shared and static. Consider, then, how many of the contributions to this volume use a discussion of belief to present a very different notion of culture as a whole. Mitchell and Mitchell see their work as moving us toward a 'performative' rather than a 'propositional' stance to culture, wherein the constitution of the self and of culture cannot be understood through overdetermined, logocentric models of analysis. Lindquist, meanwhile, sees 'social styles' as based not on fixed cognitive stances but rather on modes of 'being in the world' and practices that are not merely repeated, but are forms of *poesis* whereby cultural perception and practice mutually constitute each other. Stroeken also worries about the possibility of presenting culture in terms of static beliefs—in terms of a somehow already given 'program'—and here he echoes Hicks's discussion of the mutual and dynamic interactions between meaning and material forms.

Other examples could be provided from the articles gathered here, but the point is that the contributions to this volume can themselves be seen as expressions of contemporary versions of anthropology that have become skeptical toward the notion of culture—including belief—as always already 'given' and therefore describable (by ourselves or our informants) in propositional form. The ways in which we articulate our relative lack of 'belief' in belief themselves emerge from our shifting discipline, and of course we can expect our attitudes to continue to change over time. Thus, in writing 'against belief' we cannot hope—or even wish—to remove it from our analytical lexicon forever. We can try, however, to show the value of writing 'against', rather than 'with', the term.

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Notes

1. The occasion was the April 2005 meeting of the Society for the Anthropology of Religion.
2. Thus, the intellectualist position argues for beliefs emerging out of the human need to understand and thereby control the world (e.g., Saler [1993] 2000: 138; Skorupski 1976: 9). One historical contrast has been with the symbolist position, which views statements of belief as expressions of social relations rather than literal statements.
3. 'Credo' is of course the Latin word for 'I believe'.
4. Here there are perhaps echoes of Don Handelman's discussion in this volume of the ways in which the presence of a certain form of belief can be related to the logic of a given cosmos.
5. Ruel (1997: 109–110) argues that there is little evidence that there is anything equivalent to Christian belief in other world religions. He accepts that some parallels with Islam may be evident, with the first of the five pillars (witness to God and his Prophet) coming close to being a credo. In addition, Islam as submission to the one God (*iman*), can be identified with having belief. However, says Ruel, as the shared root with the Hebrew *mn* testifies, the reference is largely to the quality of a relationship—that of keeping faith and having trust—so that it is less the *content* of belief that has become elaborated in Islam than the *duties* of the relationship.
6. Protestant writings, in turn, came to stress a particular form of subjective appropriation of belief. See also Wilfred Cantwell Smith's (e.g., 1998; Bowie 2000: 245) explorations of the etymology of the word 'belief' and his conclusion that our understanding of the term is relatively recent. In Old English, to believe meant 'to hold dear', and for Chaucer it was to 'pledge loyalty'. Belief in God was not a claim to hold to something that could not be proved; it was a promise to live one's life in the service of God, like a bondsman to his lord. Only by the end of the seventeenth century did belief indicate a choice between two possible explanations or propositions—belief in the *divine* origins of God or belief in the *human* origins of God.
7. Of course, before either Needham or Ruel had attacked 'belief', it had already been abandoned by Lienhardt in his depiction of the Dinka. As Carrithers (1992: 191–192) points out, Lienhardt shows how propositional statements, credos, and acts of faith are irrelevant to his ethnography. Among the Dinka, the Powers 'emerge' from events and are connected with the Dinka experience of what we refer to as nature; no Dinka is ever asked to 'believe' in such Powers.

8. Although Gellner's point (1974), summarized well by Luhmann (1989), has been that "[i]n making sense of other people's behavior, charitably attributing rationality to them, we treat people as if they have a more or less coherent set of proposition-like beliefs to which they adhere, by which they organize their life and for which they would argue" (ibid.: 308). Such charity can be seen as unrealistic when applied in either Western or non-Western contexts, but also indicates that we may assume that others hold 'false' beliefs that they are able to organize logically and systematically.
9. Indeed, part of the impetus behind the recent efflorescence of research on conservative Protestantism has been its re-emergence in the public spheres of, for instance, American political and cultural life (see, e.g., Ammerman 1987).
10. See also Ruel's (1997) list of 'fallacious implications' here.
11. The minimal obligation should certainly be "to stipulate the particular definition of belief [and, we should add, of 'experience', 'knowledge', and other key notions] that we choose to adopt" (Needham 1972: 189).
12. Note also that the volume does not contain a piece covering cognitive, evolutionary approaches to religious concepts, such as can be found in, for example, Boyer (2001).
13. For a brilliant account of the interrelations between Protestant 'creedal' forms and modernity, see Keane (2007).

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