Believing and the Practice of Religion

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BELIEVING

And the Practice of Religion

Catherine Bell
-- Wittgenstein: “The meaning of prayer is the activity of praying.” (Phillips ‘65:3 Concept of Prayer)
-- Macy: “belief” does not exist, just beliefs. (No! Just acts of believing)
-- Zizek: belief the structuring priniciple of socially bound lives and deepest yearnings

-- (Based on Mark Lilla, NYTMag art -> book) To more scholars, religion in its fullness is unfamiliar, more easily romanticized. The more society today, thinking to contain religion, emphasizes the secularity of our society, the more unfamiliar religion becomes, the more ‘other.’ Secular and religious mutually define each other, just as does science and religion. For many religions, secular West is all that is godless. But are we really so secular, or just degrees of difference, not along a spectrum but multiple dimensions (gov’t, individual, etc).
To

Steven
Contents

Dedication

Preface

Introduction: Belief, Beliefs, Believing
  Universal and particular
  Historical semantics
  Problems of particularism

Practicing

Chapter One: The Social History of Belief

Chapter Two: The Psychological Perspective

Chapter Three: The Biology of Belief

Chapter Four: Practicing Belief

Chapter Five: The Data of Believing

Chapter Six: Theory Confers, Infers, Defers

Notes

Bibliography
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

Introduction. The Problem of Belief
   -- Why Belief is a problem for this book
   -- Problem status in various fields
   -- researching this book has taken from: Hume to Dennett to the new pragmatism
     of Rorty and literary criticism of Herrnstein-Smith or continental criticism of Foucault;
     anthropology from Evans-Pritchard through Needham and Rappaport; historically
     Pelikan Arnold etc; wm James to Winik.; sociology; cognitive and evolutionary
     neuroscience Churchland as well as the wildly growing field of cognitive anthropology-
     psychology Boyer Whitehouse. Many of these lines of thinking link to the each other and
     are regularly tapped by scholars of religion. So I will focus as much as possible on the
     study of religion and the field of religious studies, which will bring in so much more in
     the course of the discussion. This processual decision is not meant to be ontologically or
     historically descriptive, simply a tactic for dealing with the plethora of material in regard
     to the goals of this book.
   -- Goal = Not aiming at a theory (see Bauerlein), but a conversation, less about
     how we think of ourselves (reigning conversations about religion ???) and more about
     how we are doing with our inherited interpretive categories... Hope to introduce the
     possibility of a new way of speaking about belief that does not violate too much entrench
     linguistic habits of the world in which we live -- which would doom any new attempt --
     but attempts simply to heighten awareness and shift the emphasis of certain relationships
     in that world. So will not seek to condemn or advocate a ban on language of belief, but
     change where our confidence lies when using it. Quine on how pragmatic analysis
     undertakes “the task of making explicit what had been tacit, and precise what had been
     vague; of exposing and resolving paradoxes, smoothing kinks, lopping off vestigial
     growths, clearing the ontological slums.” (Bauerlein 2, see ff)
   -- Section by section précis

Chapter One. Belief, Beliefs, Believing

   -- [this section can be fitted into the beginning of the next one] the definitional
     morass, in English and beyond: versions of the folk category an what is debated in it;
     more formal attempts in neuroscience, cognitive science, anthropology? Philosophy...);
     going beyond English (are there beliefs where there are not words for such things?)

   -- Universalism vs Particularism
     - Argument against Christian universalism: Lopez, Pouillon, Ruel, Wiebe?
     - Cult semantics & Hist linguistics: Pelikan, Needham, Veyne? WCSSmith?
     - Hist and Cult utility ie ‘social fact’: Arnold, Shweder, Southwald
     - Cognitive and Evolutionary arguments: Boyer, Rappaport

Or Biological here and Cognitive in next subgroup?
Chapter Two.
-- Thinking. Social History of Belief – how bodies of theological doctrines arise (Izutsu); oral vs written (Pelikan, Good); Language of Comparative Religion (WHSmith, Wiebe)

-- Traditions of Western Rel or how once Christians Came to Believe (not the first?) they decided others do or should; Pagans, Primitives and all those “other” religions; Description of Islamic orthodox development. Pelikan and WC Smith

-- Feeling. Experience = Psychological Center – explaining mysticism, collective representations, cultural symbols

--[Socio-]Biology of Belief or Cognitive Naturalism

Chapter Three. Believing – A Doing not a Thinking or a Feeling

Mechanisms that are psycho-social focus on individual
Prayer as agency (vs the lack of agency in most social and critical theory views that would have social structuring lead to embodied ideology
Cosmologies for action
Compartments vs coherence
But It Feels Better: Your Truth, My Truth
Performative practices for constructing a formulaic psycho-social identity
Role of the marginal & imaginative (aka hope)

4. Constituencies with a Stake, Some Suggestions for the Study of Believing

Scientists, Religionists, Scholars, and the Rest
Let Me Count the Ways (we believe)
Who are we trying to convince
Breaking out of the Us/Them’s: Scholars have no purchase, just interest
Chapter 1: Introduction: The problem; Belief, Beliefs, Believing; overview of whole

a) Main problems identified: Universal or particular; mental or performative; private or social. This is the supposed universality given Christian assumptions; the problem of implied individual/private existence, as well as the historical, political cultural “social fact.”

[Durk on rel as beliefs and rites suggests that these two categories may be the founding assumptions of universality in the study of religion.]

b) Many (all anthrop?) declare they cannot use the term (Ruel, Pouillan, Needham, Wulf, Lopez), tho others have productively done so (Southwold, Arnold, phil of rel ...?).

c) History of religions/rel studies has not examined its use; in fact, it appears to deny its importance per se, but such unexamined assumptions can be very misleading, ill serving (leaving our discourse more theological?). Unexamined use of the term does make arguments rest on inherently theological (or about theology) grounds (distance from or ally with Wiebe?):
   -- historical exp of Christian credo formulation
   -- faith rooted in individual experience [cp ‘science’ explaining cognitive/biology of belief]
   -- ignoring how belief is used ethnically, politically, role of polls (census already noted); Viswanathan, Lilla, etc
   -- Theorization of belief in theology (Reckwitz)

d) The problems resulting from or just accompanying the current particularism (when a theological-universal is rejected for particularistic; eg Needham; Evans Pritchard, etc) and post-colonial analysis (Lopez); benefits of particularism too, of course! Namely,
   -- the subtle reintroduction of universalist assumptions endemic to any posturing of “study.” Need to grapple with that!
   -- ramifications for any definition of “religion” and methods for its study, e.g. religious studies

[“Religion”: Paradigms plus: use Chidester on West slow to call others’ “religion”; also add JZS to argument about Christianity as prototype (see Guide to SofRel 41, Drugery 90) and his world religions research (before Masuzawa) Guide 11-42, Map 295?, Harvard Theo Rev ’96:295-6.]

e) Practice theory: value of a focus on believing and construction of a focus on practice; later look at multiple examples of believing from a comparative practice stance...
Chapter 2: Theorizing Belief: Three Exclusive Angles

a) The Social History of Belief: Take the above-mentioned emergence of theological doctrine and find in it a purely social historical explanation (Izutsu-ish; Veyne) Greek world - early Christian social/theological heritage – involves a theory of belief as developing in response to social challenges from within or without, so very likely in plural environment, even midst ‘orthopraxy’, that is, more isolated society, where there are still challenges that occasion some degree of formulation of resolve and practice, even if it is simply reason for greater or lesser participation; so all cultures are involved in this approach to belief-formation even when minimally in formal ideas. Lilla, Ruel, Izard

b) The Psychological Analysis of Belief: Take the psychological theme and find in it an historical recasting in terms of experience (Christian -post-Reformation w/ a contrast w Enlightenment rationality yielding the irrational, and Arnold-type explanation of personal reflection on (or against); role of empirical reality, social influence, etc. WJames, Wulff, Needham

c) The Biology of Belief #3: cognitive theories of neurophysiology, neuroscience, evolutionary adaptation, incl. Barrett, Atran and Rapaport, Fuller notes

Needham on EP: creed tolerant it, define “intentionally” ad herent

Superstition - see Izard on Superstitions

A: anyone analyze rel. exp. in terms of Foucault’s “care of self”

6: discourse that generates self as subject of reflection/production...
Chapter 3: Believing: A Practice Theory

a) Makes non-dualist activities the main focus, not secondary to some mental orientation. Enables the exploration of the mentalities of performance; focus on expressions, not representations;

b) Universals that accompany all theorizing are theoretical categories not data; what this angles hides is outweighed by what it affords: access to components of world construction, individual/social from another perspective; a wider characterization based on power arrangements

c) The cosmological (w/wo coherence) and the contradictory (as power structuring, empowering) in the independent and the plural societies, doctrinal and non-doctrinal traditions

d) Practice theory approach w/ 4 features;

Southwold, Arnold, Cameron, Bourdieu

Chapter 4: Believing -- Case Studies in How Practice Approach Informs ...

Responding to polls; Praying for money; Healing; Evangelical face-to-face witnessing; Abiding by the book; Ritual grazing; Chinese morality? Magic?

Conclusion:

Role of theory in ‘conferring’, not presuming, universalism -- even as it involves uncovering and recovering particularism (how differs from Shweder?); how this meets the post-colonial critique. Using the terminology of believing.
Preface

As she was approaching ninety years of age, my mother began to talk more directly about God, what she believed, and whether she could be found wanting. As the child who studied religion, I got all her hard questions. Invariably, however, she would structure the conversation around the same points and what I had to say, whether challenging or soothing, never really mattered. “I’m not sure I believe or not. I certainly don’t think it’s likely there’s the sort of God I was ever taught to believe in. It’s hard to believe there is a God who cares about us. All I can do is hope that if God exists, he’ll accept that I tried to understand and that I tried to live a good life -- I did what I could.” My mother did not want a theological response and she certainly had no use for any historical or comparative framing. She was trying to make things right, work out who she had been, in her own estimation, and clarify what she could believe and what was too uncomfortable to invoke even at this late moment in her life. She inevitably wanted the comfort of being true to herself and, naturally, being on the right side of God should he exist. After all, she repeated, she was a believer “in her own way.” However, my mother would regularly begin and end these predominantly one-sided discussions with the “hard” questions: “Am I a believer or not? What counts as belief?”

There are many reasons to address my mother’s specific and more general questions of my mother. This book, however, will not even make the attempt. It is an effort quite different, limited and, from my mother’s perspective, hopelessly abstract. Aside from the fact that I would hesitate to discuss topics for which I have such a poor track record of useful contributions, my agenda is shaped by other issues. Yet I take up the topic of belief, in my own way, quite aware that for many people questions about belief are very personal and often complicated. Hopefully, my more abstract perspective will not lose sight of this fact.

I address the phenomenon of believing for several reasons, none of them quite so motivationally distinct as they might appear here. For starters, I was reminded of a challenge to myself contained in the opening page of my first book on thinking about ritual to return some day to give equal attention to that other component of religion identified in the simple Durkheimian definition of religion of ritual and belief. In an short effort in that direction, I was surprised that this ubiquitous term among scholars of religion had received so little attention by the comparativists, those most exposed to other ways of believing. Some discussions certainly exist and they will be fully mined here. Yet they are all quite polemical, usually limited
in scope, and rarely invoke the more expansive treatments of the topic available in related disciplines such as anthropology, history, and philosophy. New developments were the goad that made the enormous challenge irresistible. On the one hand, a spate of books on the rationality of religious belief by some eminent scholars and writers, among others, staked out some highly ludicrous/questionable positions given much attention by the popular press. On the other hand, new theoretical and empirical developments in cognitive neuropsychology (cognitive theory) were introducing the perspective, and fruits, of a new rationalism to the study of religion. Their various studies of religious belief appeared to redefine the topic that was so rarely addressed by more traditional scholars of religion.

There are, of course, even broader reasons to inquire into our ideas about believing. This is a contradictory time. For many, secular and religious boundaries have never been as clear and important. Yet for others, confidence in the exorable spread of secular modernity is giving way to a new examination of the self-interested assumptions underlying this European and American ideology; the door is open for scholars of all persuasions to take religious beliefs with a new seriousness. Today religious strife, the form in which secular society generally notices religion, does not appear as simply another form of class struggle, colonial resistance, or opposition to modernization. Rather, a fragile consensus is forming that ideas matter, cultures matter, religion matters. But at this time of opportunity, the developments of the last thirty years leave many scholars of religion unable to pass through that door, let alone help explain what is on the other side. Stimulating scholarship on embodiment and performance, as well as more highly nuanced discussions of older distinctions between oral literate cultures, or tribal and creedal religions make it uncomfortable to return to the term belief. And the insights of postmodernist and postcolonial studies give us an aversion to characterizing (essentializing) large entities such as Islam or global Christian evangelicalism in terms of their beliefs. We are effectively sidelined for the very discussion to which we could be particularly relevant.

These reasons reasons for a book on such a huge, amorphous and contentious topic as belief lead me, first of all, to impose some order on our resources for addressing it and our past patterns of engagement. New sources of information, either ignored or overly embraced by scholars of religion, also demand incorporation. And the book does argue a thesis; while clear, in the spirit of the age it affirms this, problematizes that, ultimately suggesting a shift of perspective to afford a reasonable, and effective way to deal with competing scholarly goals.
Preface

When I first decided to study religion so many years ago there were a number of clear issues on my mind, topics that I wanted to understand and that possible to understand. Foremost among these topics was the question of belief. If I had articulated it then I might have put it something like this: Are there effective ways to understand the reasons for types and degrees of belief such as those I had encountered in my admittedly limited experience? Given the background was bring to my studies, I would have continued, I am set to take belief seriously but unsure how to bring all of its dimensions under the light of objective examination. Reading on this topic had intrigued me and drew me to study religion, but my own experience with religion convinced me that solving the question of belief, whatever "solving" might mean, it, would involve the attempt to address something very profoundly human. Graduate studies and the demands of an academic career, however, do not encourage anything but the most delineated questions and projects, always with the assumption that the larger issues are more properly addressed "later" as one matured in knowledge and experience. It has been gratifying in my 'mature' years to see a few colleagues shift their focus to consider more encompassing formulations that ultimately animate the study of religion. More often we are apt to stay in the small field we have plowed for years, digging a little deeper, widening one's contribution, but always trying to get the specifics of a discrete set of phenomenon as right as possible. Those big, floppy questions with which we began usually looked a bit naïve as they were stowed in the closet of old artifacts.

For me this book is a return to my early over-sized queries. It is a grateful but anxious return. Despite the some satisfaction of addressing the bigger questions around which the intellectual details of my career might possibly be rendered more coherent, I have known that the probability of a satisfying set of answers if very slim. This long delayed feat of gestation might give birth to a mere mouse, that is, a morsel of well-meant effort wrapped up wordy explications of what were never quite the right question to begin with. But armed with various protective dissemblings, I rose to the bait provided by the sheer size and prominence of the void, the void that is the absence of any real attention to the concept of belief in the most definitive tool of the trade, the Encyclopedia of Religion. In both the original 1986 edition and the revision of 2005, there is no entry for the term belief. An inquisitive reader is instructed to "See Doubt (and Belief)" for what
the revised edition explains is a philosophical discussion of the interrelation of doubt and belief in the Western tradition (get a quote here). It is in fact more theological than philosophical; it is certainly not a social scientific analysis of the term or the phenomenon. [More on references to belief in EofR as developed in Smith Festschrift]

Such a lacuna at the heart of religious studies is intriguing in any number of ways. Oversights have the own peculiar logic which, as Freud suggested, may reveal the contrivances that keep a particular logical structure afloat as an effective discourse. Perhaps the explicit unease the term has caused a handful of ethnographers (from Needham to Ruel?) and historians (Lopez) is the cause of this lacuna. Or it might be that the signature discussion of belief and faith by an eminence of a particular school of religious studies (W C Smith, D Wiebe) suggests a narrowing specificity to any further treatment. Yet, however much these arguments might also constitute material for more encompassing engagement, the sheer fact that hardly a page can be turned in the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, or most other books in the field, without seeing the author’s recourse to the term from one angle or another itself demands a more self-conscious and critically reflexive analysis.

Scholars of religion are insignificant in the dynamic popular engagement of the phenomenon. In this decade the question of belief has been the subject of volleys of mass-market publications. The decade began with Michael Shermer’s *Why People Believe Weird Things* (1997) and Wendy Kaminer’s *Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials* (1999). More recently a stir has greeted *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel Dennett, and *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris. Yet the foregoing authors see themselves are merely responding to the popularity and assertive styles of American religion. There has been a remarkable growth of religious publishing, effectively epitomized by the success of Huston Smith’s *The World Religions* and the Christian fundamentalist novel, *Going Beyond*. Simultaneously, biological and evolutionary accounts of the roots and rise of religion, introduced by Dawkins’s *The God Gene* by Richard Dawkins, have been equally numerous, with such titles as *Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* by A. Newburg et al., and *The God Part of the Brain* by Matthew Alper. The level of interest in religion and belief in this post-millennial era is unquestionably high. While scientists have weighed in on the problems of religiosity despite how
our evolutionary heritage makes us biologically prone to believe, and the specter of religious terrorism has made all thinking people try to better understand religious dispositions, scholars of religion have generally been very slow to engage the bigger question at the root of these discussions. Not engaged any particular part of the wide-ranging interest in what it is to believe. While not nearly as entertaining as some of the aforementioned titles, this book is a small contribution to effort to locate and animate this discussion within the formal study of religion.

Materials included here were first developed for three conferences and subsequently published, in part, under the aegis of those events: a small conference sponsored by Dartmouth College in 2000, which subsequently published the papers as Radical Interpretation in Religion, edited by Nancy K Frankenberry; a joint Princeton-Oxford seminar on “Faith in the Ancient World” held in 2006-07, with my presentation subsequently developed in part for publication in Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith (2007) and a volume of seminar papers currently under development …. ; and finally a small conference on religion held by the journal History and Theory at Wesleyan College, which published the papers in a 2006/7 special issue of the journal. I am grateful to my colleagues at these events for their generous responses to my initial efforts in this area and their permissions to reproduce sections of that material.

I am indebted to the generosity of the College of Arts and Sciences at Santa Clara University for the time to work on the early stages of this book and to a research fellowship from the National Endowment for Humanities (2007-2008) during which time it was put into its final form. Finally, I want to thank my husband, Steven Gelber, who prodded me to continue to work on this book despite many physical distractions: he believed in me and this project and would brook no heretical objections.

Catherine Bell
2007
Introduction - “The Problem of Belief”

An investigation of a topic should begin with an explanation of why that topic warrants one’s interest in the first place. In other words, an investigator should understand why the topic constitutes a ‘problem’ – at least for her. Of course, many scholarly investigations, indeed some of the best, focus on topics that most people do not consider a problem; only a small pool of similarly-focused colleagues would pay any attention. Analysis of the type of problem posed by the topic is also not really a preliminary step so much as the initial stage of an argument that will permeate all subsequent stages. In the same vein, any answer as to why the topic constitutes a problem worthy of study is usually not the whole of it; the reasons to research a topic are usually not the research itself. Although why something strikes us as needing to be accounted for often goes far to explain how that topic might be more effectively understood.

I entered graduate school with a history of on-again off-again believing, a set of experiences that made me very aware of the intricacies of religious belief and its powerful role in shaping how a person acts. What could be more basic to study? I was eager to assemble a fuller and thoroughly objective picture of what happens when people believe, why they believe, or what makes them continue to believe. Admittedly, these were questions that even a first-year graduate student understood as shaped by large historical forces: clearly, at one time and in other places, people may not be aware of themselves as believers; and questions about belief were wonderfully general about religion as some sort of clear cut phenomenon when most belief is not in religion so much as it is in such and such a deity or doctrine or practice. And then there are all the beliefs that have little to do with religion in our secular societies.

The effect of graduate school reorientations and specializations is such that only now do I have the time and inclination to return to such an unwieldy topic. And it is also one of the effects of graduate school and a career in the scholarly community, that one ends up primarily interested in how scholars, or others, have put together this category and proceeded to use it – or ignore it – even more than how the phenomenon might exist out in the world. I do not doubt that in so far as our words mean anything belief does exist, though its parameters may be more or less large, even less clearly demarcated, while the problem of its effective characterization will be the heart of this book. Yet the topic of belief has always been a ‘problem’ to those who would change the way in which another people were religious; or those for whom a secular separation of the
sphere of rational discourse was fairly distinct from discourse of various religiously-minded communities, a group that would include scholars focused on that other great category ‘religion’; or even those whose theological or pastoral instincts, shaped by this modern differentiation of spheres, wished to address themselves to the religiosity of those in their care, being wont to talk as much about what belief we... should be believed. From the cross-cultural contact of missionaries and ethnologists, through the intelligentsia’s mapping of social facts, to the immersed theologians reflecting the relevant categories -- all speak of beliefs.

And, again, these are just the religious applications of the term. May a study of religious belief be doing its part to maintain the borders of the secular/religious worldview? While one might imagine a scholarly warrior, or Enlightenment humanitarian, battling the evidence of encroachment or lack of clear walls -- we call all name several -- but it may be more likely the study is defending religion as a scholarly focus since it is the field in which so many of us hold our credentials and receive our salaries. Yet this does not explain the way in which a large swath of scholars of religion ignore the topic: not philosophers or psychologists of religion, but historians of religion (phenomenologists?), comparativists, and specialists in particular traditions.

Today awareness of the historically provisional nature of any such secular questioning is routinely considered part of the ‘problem’ identified with the topic. As an individual scholar with the training generally expected of an academician I share a perspective with other disciplinary approaches the distinctive biases which we are not expected to transcend but we are certainly encouraged to explore. When such biases are made the subject of scrutiny they can lead the investigator in circles of self-examination. ... The compensation, adequate or inadequate, depends on where the study locates its dominant bias, as in the bias of secularism, defined as ‘not including’ or ‘opposed to’ religion, or the bias of colonialism, argued to propagate distortions deriving from one culture’s assumptions about belief.

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1 Needham notes the definitions of religion that depend on belief: Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Geertz, etc. pp 21. “standard acceptation of belief as the distinctive feature of religion...” E-P appears convinced that the lack of “a system of nomenclature” enabling the “wide comparative study of phenomena” hindered his presentation of Zande religion, and if provided would be of great service. (EP p8)
Scholars of religion, however, have always addressed belief, as well as beliefs in science and secularism. Nonetheless, for them as well as the larger population, belief is commonly understood to be the essential feature of religion. However, few in Religious Studies have explored the pertinent ambiguities of the term. Donald Lopez was a welcome voice on the matter, following by many years the work of W. C. Smith and his critic Donald W. Schultze. The 1986 Encyclopedia of Religion, edited by Mircea Eliade, did not even include a distinct entry for "Belief"; under that heading the reader is told to "See Doubt (And Belief)."

The ambitious goal of this book is, simultaneously, to propose an analysis of the tangle of history and current motivation that might influence a tendency to think of religious belief as clear entity, or a clear problem; to analyze how constructions of religious belief have governed our thinking about religion; and to propose a way to enable our ingrained linguistic patterns to lead to translations of allow for a wider variety of experience than older patterns have generally allowed.

It became something of a reflex of "the problem" of belief, a problem first identified by Hume, who suggested that particular "operation of the mind" constitutes "one of the greatest mysteries of philosophy." Bertrand Russell added a serious emphasis, avering that "belief ... is the central problem in the analysis of mind." Its status as a problem in philosophy continues.

On another front, the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard was the first to broach the idea that categories like belief, as with the process of cultural translation in general, may not be able to convey type of spiritual relationships in Zande have, the mystical notions (kwoth) they find supported by their own experience [N 29: a verbal concept of belief does exist in Nuer...ngath; E-P distinguishes faith from belief, tho N does not, no reference]. His student, Rodney Needham, undertook a comprehensive analysis of the idea, and determined that its Indo-European roots made it inadequate to translate concepts and interior experiences from cultures that never saw any need to generate a comparable concept. N Donald Lopez depicts the internalization of belief

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3 Rodney Needham, Belief, Language and Experience (University of Chicago, 1972), p. 7 (Russell, 'The Analysis of Mind' 1921, p. 231. who echoed in Needham, p. 7. It was to become important to Pierce and Quine, Hartshorne and Wittgenstein, even among more recent...
in the historical circumstances of the Inquisition and its role in cross-cultural obscurantism in the colonial reach of its Christian biases. N Rejecting the conclusions of his disciplinary forebearers, the anthropologist Richard Shweder finds that belief ?? embodies the “faultline” (1989). But Rodney Needham’s invaluable analysis of the concept, both philosophically and anthropologically, argued that it could not be restricted to any particular academic disciplines since it “has to do with the fundamental premises of any humane discipline.” Talal Asad’s “genealogy” of religion argue that an critical emphasis on belief as the internal psychology of individuals, (Needham conclusion) enabled marginalization of religion in the modern world. (1998: xvii). In the context of postcolonial literary criticism, Gauri Vivswanathan extends Asad’s argument to the role of conversion, an intense experience for believers, central to the narrative of the modern state as it opposes the emotional subjectivity of minorities to the politics of their civil rights. (?) In one form or another, belief is also prominent on the current landscape of popular life in America. Not confined to secularists, belief has become an explicit problem for many citizens over the last decade in which they have been haunted by acts of Islamist terrorism and polarized by the political influence of the Christian right. In a series of high profile books, the biologist Richard Dawkins decries the “God Delusion”; the philosopher Daniel Dennett seeks to “Break the Spell”; while the …. Christopher Hitchins pulls no punches in decrying the “poison” of belief in the supernatural. Hence the popular press finds belief to be a contentious topic at a time of unprecedented social polarization between so-called believers and atheists. At the same time, however, some postmodern writers suggest that the religious believer/secular atheist dichotomy is effectively transcended. Wayne Proudfoot, eminent philosopher of religion, writes that any conflict between religious belief and scientific concepts is now simply “a naïve misunderstanding” of both. The philosopher John Caputo more whimsically argues that in this “post-secular” age, religion and science are not opposites, rather “the opposite of a religious

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4 Richard A. Shweder 1989
5 Rodney Needham, Belief, Language and Experience (University of Chicago, 1972), xiv.
person is a loveless person” or a “selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon.” Anyone who loves something madly is evidence of a “religion without religion.”

Historically, of course, belief has been the focus of analyses of religion stretching from Irenaeus to Karl Rahner, David Hume to Donald Davidson, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith to Slavoj Žižek. To explore the concept of belief from its earliest roots to its modern conundrums would, of course, be an enormous, and therein quite scattered, survey. Sheer semantic spread suggests a few problems inherent to belief in popular usage. For example, the term is used for religious commitment to sacred truths as well as one’s degree of confidence in a weather report or intention to take even a trivial action (that old master of the language, W C Fields’s “Everyone should believe in something. I believe I’ll have another drink.”) This study will simply probe the issues attending belief that seem most relevant to how the study of religion conducts itself today. Its purpose is less systematicity than provocation, that is, it will attempt to indicate all the problems and resources by which to generate a conversation within the study of religion about this most basic of categories.

The goal of this study is not a new theory of belief. Such a project would cement the reification that is already enshrined in this concept. No, the goal is to contribute to a conversation about how we think of ourselves (already underway in regard to the category of religion ????) and how we think about what we are doing with our inherited interpretive categories. This is a pragmatic analysis that, in the words of Quine, emulates “the task of making explicit what had been tacit, and precise what had been vague; of exposing and resolving paradoxes, smoothing kinks, lopping off vestigial growths, clearing the ontological slums.” (Bauerlein 2, see ff) I hope to suggest and support the possibility of a new way of speaking about belief that neither so violates entrench linguistic habits of the world in which we live that it is doomed from the beginning nor shuns the real work task of heightening awareness that leads to a shift in the emphasis of certain relationships in this world. Therefore I will not seek to condemn or

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advocate a ban on language of belief, however trendy that might seem, but instead aim at changing where our confidence lies when using it.

Chapter descriptions
Few terms are more broadly scattered across the palette of Western languages than ...rough equivalents of the noun and verb, belief and believe. The definitional morass, in English and beyond: versions of the folk category an what is debated in it; more formal attempts in neuroscience, cognitive science, anthropology? Philosophy...); going beyond English (are there beliefs where there are not words for such things?). Least read book: Needham

Some describe the difficulties of defining belief and then getting at the experience described (Arnold 19: Needham argues that one cannot get at the diff betw belief, its expression in language and its experience in lived reality)

Today the topic of religious belief fills the popular press of the secular world. Global and regional terrorism generate numerous attempts to explain the political and redemptive logic of religious beliefs. (nb M Lilla 2007) The 200(?) decision by the Kansas State School Board to include ‘intelligent design’ in the high school (?) science curriculum occasioned more blanket critiques of religious beliefs by distinguished scientists among others, even though the decision was reversed when a new school board was voted in the following year. (Dennett, Dawkins, Harris, et alia). Overall, the story of Western secularism is being rewritten due to the unexpected roles of religious belief in shaping events.

For Anthropology, however, the issue was the subject of an extended exploration that included E E Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham, Martin Southwold and Richard Schweder ....among others. It appears that the field most dependent upon the concept of belief is the most reluctant to fully engage its complexities.

Chapter one addresses the various tensions that have contradictorily shaped discussions of belief. Foremost is the impasse between the forces of universalism on the one hand and particularism on the other. It has been a working assumption throughout the history of discussions of religion that belief is universal; it is an assumption that continues to prop up the whole explanatory framework of “comparative religion,” “world religions,” and “global religions.” Yet a handful of impressive voices have long argued for the particularism of belief, notably, its embeddness in the Christian identity that was forged in the early centuries of anno domino. To use a term so coined by and saturated with a Christian outlook is only to handicap further any scholarly rags of objectivity. An equally powerful tensions exist between thinking of belief as mental or physical, private or social. Is belief something that the individual embraces in his or her heart and mind, on the basis of which the individual participates in a social community marked by rites and customs; or is belief the product of one’s social involvement in such a community and it exists only as a performative disposition and bodily experience that is instigated as much in a social context as private one? The study of religion has tracked in different directions based on how they favor one set of tensions over another. Certain Catholic or Protestant tendencies lace these choices, but many other factors have become equally important.

Chapter Two takes us the historical treatment of belief. Not simply how it came to be associated with Christian identity, but whether it predates Christianity, without assuming universality. one of the lower key tensions surrounding belief is whether it should be reserved for personal commitment to a set of doctrines or used more loosely to fit the evidence that people made
choices about the nature, degree and object of their commitments. Further, there are several
studies that argue for the social conditions in which ‘believing’ comes to be expected of
followers and the nature of that belief is very much shaped by the questions that emerged in
these communities and how they came to be answered -- by formalizing doctrine, sectarian
division, or emerging authority structures.

Universalism vs Particularism
- Argument against Christian particularism/universalism: Lopez, Pouillon, Ruel, Wiebe?
- Cult semantics & Hist linguistics: Pelikan, Needham, Veyne? WCSmith?
- Hist and Cult utility ie ‘social fact’: Arnold, Shweder, Southwald
- Cognitive and Evolutionary arguments: Boyer, Rappaport
  Or Biological here and Cognitive in next subgroup?

[Beware the universalism of theoretical language and its wielders]

Mental Private Experience vs Performative Social Representation
Wm James, Hume, Wulff, Needham, Reckwitz?, Zizek
Also Boyer as anti Social Represen
Introduction. The Problem of Belief

-- Why Belief is a problem for this book
-- Problem status in various fields
-- researching this book has taken from: Introduction. The Problem of Belief
-- Why Belief is a problem for this book
-- Problem status in various fields
-- researching this book has taken from: Hume to Dennett to the new pragmatism of Rorty and literary criticism of Herrnstein-Smith or continental criticism of Foucault; anthropology from Evans-Pritchard through Needham and Rappaport; historically Pelikan Arnold etc; wm James to Wini.; sociology; cognitive and evolutionary neuroscience Churchland as well as the wildly growing field of cognitive anthropology-psychology Boyer Whitehouse. Many of these lines of thinking link to the each other and are regularly tapped by scholars of religion. So I will focus as much as possible on the study of religion and the field of religious studies, which will bring in so much more in the course of the discussion. This processual decision is not meant to be ontologically or historically descriptive, simply a tactic for dealing with the plethora of material in regard to the goals of this book.

-- Goal = Not aiming at a theory (see Bauerlein), but a conversation, less about how we think of ourselves (reigning conversations about religion ????) and more about how we are doing with our inherited interpretive categories... Hope to introduce the possibility of a new way of speaking about belief that does not violate too much entrench linguistic habits of the world in which we live -- which would doom any new attempt -- but attempts simply to heighten awareness and shift the emphasis of certain relationships in that world. So will not seek to condemn or advocate a ban on language of belief, but change where our confidence lies when using it. Quine on how pragmatic analysis undertakes “the task of making explicit what had been tacit, and precise what had been vague; of exposing and resolving paradoxes, smoothing kinks, lopping off vestigial growths, clearing the ontological slums.” (Bauerlein 2, see ff)

-- Section by section précis

Introduction - “The Problem of Belief”

An investigation of a topic should begin with an explanation of why the topic warrants one’s interest in the first place. In other words, an investigator should understand why the topic constitutes a ‘problem’ – at least for her. After all, most scholarly investigations, indeed some of the best, focus on topics that many people do not consider a problem. Analysis of the problem posed by the topic is also not a preliminary step so much as the initial stage of an argument that
will permeate subsequent stages. In the same vein, an answer to why the topic constitutes a problem worthy of study is usually not the whole of it; in other words, the reasons to research a topic are usually not the research itself, although why something strikes us as needing to be accounted for often go far to explain how that topic might be more effectively understood.

A personal longstanding reason for a book inquiring into the phenomenon of religious belief is simple. Once I was a believer, thoughtfully and intimately committed, and then I was no longer one, with a different set of thoughts and emotions. While I was able to ‘explain’ my believing and my not-believing in the popular Freudian patois of the day, I wanted to assemble a fuller picture of what had happened and explore whether what was true for me might useful for understanding others. These were the personal motivations among the various circumstances that led me to the study of religion in the first place. There are also more immediate triggers for this project on belief. For example, my first book addressed ritual and I noted at the time that a full study of religion would demand a corresponding analysis of belief, following the great Durkheim in the simple definition of religion as a matter of beliefs and rites. This definition remains a working, first-level description of religion, so for both scholarly and popular ways of slicing of religion, belief would be a natural topic to follow work on ritual. Another spur to engage the topic in some way lay in the realization that my discipline, the history of religions, has given rather short shrift to the whole issue of belief even as it remains a major purveyor of the term. The Encyclopedia of Religion, in both first and second editions, fails to include a discrete entry for such a basic concept.¹ The oversight, if it is that, was greatly redressed with Donald S. Lopez’s 1998? essay on belief in Mark Taylor’s Critical Terms for the Study of Religion, to which this study will constantly refer.²

Taking these motivating circumstances together, one might conclude that I will understand belief to be an essential though too easily ignored topic in the study of religion. Granted.³ However, I will be especially curious about how belief could be ignored. And I will also argue that how we deal with the category of belief is tightly linked to how we understand and investigate religion, as ethnographic phenomenon or analytic concept. The fact that belief –

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¹ The first 1986? edition edited by Mircea Eliade, the 2005 edition by Lindsay Jones
² Taylor 1998?
³ Needham notes the definitions of religion that depend on belief: Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Geertz, etc. pp 21. “standard acceptation of belief as the distinctive feature of religion...” E-P appears convinced that the lack of “a system of nomenclature” enabling the “wide comparative study of phenomena” hindered his presentation of Zande religion, and if provided would be of great service. (EP p8)
especially the irrationality of having it – is the focus of a spurt of publications by scientists, philosophers, and cultural critics was another factor in the shaping of this study. The extra public attention to very simple understandings of belief acts as a reminder: questions about the personal experience of belief are never far removed unless one is rendered oblivious to them by the anesthetizing qualities of the scholarly approach. The conflict between this approach and popular concern with belief replicate familiar stances rooted in the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The secular scholar inquiring into belief, a task imagined by the scholar more than the believer, must fear acting the part of an Enlightenment homunculus defined by the classic ascriptions of faith in conflict with reason, faith as the object of reason, or faith objectified by the ‘neutral’ forces of reason. To stand in the position of a non-believing secularist is, we know, to look at religion from a very particular perspective, one that is taken to be foreign to the practitioner’s self-consciousness. So many answers I might entertain to my questions about belief could constitute answers only from one angle and not another, perhaps not to believers. With that awareness, the constraints of the Enlightenment on the questions it allows are as clear as the liberties we know it affords.

Today awareness of the historically provisional nature of any such secular questioning is routinely considered part of the ‘problem’ identified with the topic. As an individual scholar with the training generally expected of an academician I share a perspective with other disciplinary approaches the distinctive biases which we are not expected to transcend, but we are certainly encouraged to explore. When such biases are made the subject of scrutiny they can lead the investigator in circles of self-examination. … The compensation, adequate or inadequate, depends on where the study locates its dominant bias, as in the bias of secularism, defined as ‘not including’ or ‘opposed to’ religion, or the bias of colonialism, argued to propagate distortions deriving from one culture’s assumptions about belief.

The ambitious goal of this book is, simultaneously, to identify the bias that casts religious belief as a problem, to analyze how constructions of belief have governed our studies of religion, and to propose a way to enable ingrained linguistic patterns to lead to translations of a wider variety of experience than such patterns have generally allowed.

It became something of a reflex of “the problem” of belief, a problem first identified by Hume, who suggested that particular “operation of the mind” constitutes “one of the greatest
mysteries of philosophy.”⁴ Bertrand Russell add emphasis, avering in 1921 that “belief … is the central problem in the analysis of mind.”⁵ It became important to Pierce and Quine, Hartshorne and Wittgenstein.

On another front, the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard was the first to broach the idea that categories like belief, as with the process of cultural translation in general, may not be able to convey type of spiritual relationships in Zande have, the mystical notions (kwoth) they find supported by their own experience [N 29: a verbal concept of belief does exist in Nuer…ngath; E-P distinguishes faith from belief, tho N does not, no reference]. His student, Rodney Needham, undertook a comprehensive analysis of the idea, and determined that its Indo-European roots made it inadequate to translate concepts and interior experiences from cultures that never saw any need to generate a comparable concept. N Donald Lopez depicts the internalization of belief in the historical circumstances of the Inquisition and its role in cross-cultural obscurantism in the colonial reach of its Christian biases. N Rejecting the conclusions of his disciplinary forebearers, the anthropologist Richard Shweder finds that belief ?? embodies the “faultline” ….. (1989).⁶ But Rodney Needham’s invaluable analysis of the concept, both philosophically and anthropologically, argued that it could not be restricted to any particular academic disciplines since it “has to do with the fundamental premises of any humane discipline.”⁷ Talal Asad’s “genealogy” of religion argue that an critical emphasis on belief as the internal psychology of individuals, (Needham conclusion) enabled marginalization of religion in the modern world.⁸ (1998: xvii). In the context of postcolonial literary criticism, Gauri Vivswanathan extends Asad’s argument to the role of conversion, an intense experience for believers, central to the narrative of the modern state as it opposes the emotional subjectivity of minorities to the politics of their civil rights. (?)⁹

In one form or another, belief is also prominent on the current landscape of popular life in America. Not confined to secularists, belief has become an explicit problem for many citizens over the last decade in which they have been haunted by acts of Islamist terrorism and polarized

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⁶ Richard A. Shweder 1989
by the political influence of the Christian right. In a series of high profile books, the biologist Richard Dawkins decries the “God Delusion”; the philosopher Daniel Dennett seeks to “Break the Spell”; while the ... Christopher Hitchins pulls no punches in decrying the “poison” of belief in the supernatural. Hence the popular press finds belief to be a contentious topic at a time of unprecedented social polarization between so-called believers and atheists. At the same time, however, some postmodern writers suggest that the religious believer/secular atheist dichotomy is effectively transcended. Wayne Proudfoot, eminent philosopher of religion, writes that any conflict between religious belief and scientific concepts is now simply “a naïve misunderstanding” of both.\(^{10}\) The philosopher John Caputo more whimsically argues that in this “post-secular” age, religion and science are not opposites, rather “the opposite of a religious person is a loveless person” or a “selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon.” Anyone who loves something madly is evidence of a “religion without religion.”\(^{11}\)

Historically, of course, belief has been the focus of analyses of religion stretching from Irenaeus to Karl Rahner, David Hume to Donald Davidson, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith to Slavoj Žižek. To explore the concept of belief from its earliest roots to its modern conundrums would, of course, be an enormous, and therein quite scattered, survey. Sheer semantic spread suggests a few problems inherent to belief in popular usage. For example, the term is used for religious commitment to sacred truths as well as one’s degree of confidence in a weather report or intention to take even a trivial action (that old master of the language, W C Fields’s “Everyone should believe in something. I believe I’ll have another drink.”) This study will simply probe the issues attending belief that seem most relevant to how the study of religion conducts itself today. Its purpose is less systematicity than provocation, that is, it will attempt to indicate all the problems and resources by which to generate a conversation within the study of religion about this most basic of categories.

\(^{10}\) Although a decade earlier the philosopher of religion Wayne Proudfoot could write “The idea that religious beliefs might conflict with scientific hypotheses is now widely viewed as evidence of a naïve misunderstanding of both religion and science.” WP, “From Theology to a Science of Religions: Jonathan Edwards and William James on Religious Affections,” Harvard Theological Review 82:2 (1989): 149 [-168].

The goal of this study is not a new theory of belief. Such a project would cement the reification that is already enshrined in this concept. No, the goal is to contribute to a conversation about how we think of ourselves (already underway in regard to the category of religion ???) and how we think about what we are doing with our inherited interpretive categories. This is a pragmatic analysis that, in the words of Quine, emulates “the task of making explicit what had been tacit, and precise what had been vague; of exposing and resolving paradoxes, smoothing kinks, lopping off vestigial growths, clearing the ontological slums.” (Bauerlein 2, see ff) I hope to suggest and support the possibility of a new way of speaking about belief that neither so violates entrench linguistic habits of the world in which we live that it is doomed from the beginning nor shuns the real work task of heightening awareness that leads to a shift in the emphasis of certain relationships in this world. Therefore I will not seek to condemn or advocate a ban on language of belief, however trendy that might seem, but instead aim at changing where our confidence lies when using it.

Section by section précis
Introduction - “The Problem of Belief”

Any investigation of a topic should begin with an analysis of why that topic warrants one’s interest in the first place. In other words, an investigator should understand why the topic constitutes a problem -- for her at least. Afterall, most scholarly investigations, indeed some of the best, focus on topics that many people do not consider a problem. Further, this analysis of the problem posed by the topic is not a preliminary step but an initial stage of analysis that will permeate subsequent stages. Yet an answer to why the topic constitutes a problem worthy of study is usually not the whole of it, in other words, the reasons to research a topic are usually not the research itself, although why something strikes us as needing to be accounted for often go far to explain how that topic might be more effectively understood.

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2 Taylor 1998?
essential yet too easily ignored topic in the study of religion. Yet question about the way in
which it might be essential to investigating religion as ethnographic phenomenon or analytic
concept is probably more accurate. The fact that belief – especially the irrationality of having it –
has become the focus of a recent spurt of publications by scientists, philosophers, and cultural
critics may make any study of terms a useful exercise. The increase in the potential stakes for
religion that this extra public attention brings is not further motivation for this book, but it might
be the salvation of what feels at this stage to be a quixotic foray into a very live minefield.

Questions about personal experience with belief as well questions about how it should be
approached loom over the study of religion generally. And together these concerns replicate
familiar stances rooted in the secular Enlightenment. The secular scholar inquiring into belief, a
task imagined by the scholar more than the believer, must fear acting the part of an
Enlightenment homunculus. Further, to stand in the position of a non-believing secularist is, we
know, to look at religion from a very particular perspective, one that may seem very foreign to
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belief as a problem, to analyze how constructions of belief have governed our studies of religion,
and to propose a way to enable ingrained linguistic patterns to lead to translations of a wider
variety of experience than such patterns have generally allowed.
I am certainly not the first/alone? in the last few decades to isolate the idea of belief and find it a problem. It has been consistently approached that way in various disciplines and even something of a reflex for some scholars to speak of ‘the problem of belief,’ even to see this problem as central to scholarship or the cultural-political landscape itself. In philosophy, any number of scholarly efforts continue with the emphasis proposed by Hume, that belief as an ‘operation of the mind’ constitutes ‘one of the greatest mysteries of philosophy.” Bertrand Russell suggested in 1921 that “belief ... is the central problem in the analysis of mind.” The anthropologist Richard Shweder, who inherits an articulate tradition of concern about the language of belief, finds that belief ? embodies the “faultline”...... (1989). But Rodney Needham’s invaluable analysis of the concept, both philosophically and anthropologically, argued that it could not be restricted to any particular academic disciplines since it “has to do with the fundamental premises of any humane discipline.” Rodney Needham’s invaluable analysis of the concept, both philosophically and anthropologically, argued that it could not be restricted to any particular academic disciplines since it “has to do with the fundamental premises of any humane discipline.” The anthropologist Richard Shweder, who inherits an articulate tradition of concern about the language of belief, finds that belief ? embodies the “faultline” ...... (1989). But Rodney Needham’s invaluable analysis of the concept, both philosophically and anthropologically, argued that it could not be restricted to any particular academic disciplines since it “has to do with the fundamental premises of any humane discipline.” Talal Asad’s “genealogy” of religion argue that an critical emphasis on belief as the internal psychology of individuals, (Needham conclusion) enabled marginalization of religion in the modern world. In the context of postcolonial literary criticism, Gauri Vivswanathan extends Asad’s argument to the role of conversion, an intense experience for believers, central to the narrative of the modern state as it opposes the emotional subjectivity of minorities to the politics of their civil rights. 

In one form or another, belief is also prominent on the current landscape of popular life in America. Not confined to secularists, belief has become an explicit problem for many citizens over the last decade in which they have been haunted by acts of Islamist terrorism and polarized by the political influence of the Christian right. In a series of high profile books, the biologist Richard Dawkins decries the “God Delusion”; the philosopher Daniel Dennett seeks to “Break the Spell”; while the .... Christopher Hitchins pulls no punches in decrying the “poison” of belief in the supernatural. Hence the popular press finds belief to be a contentious topic at a time of unprecedented social polarization between so-called believers and atheists. At the same time, however, some postmodern writers suggest that the religious believer/secular atheist dichotomy

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5 Richard A. Shweder 1989
6 Rodney Needham, Belief, Language and Experience (University of Chicago, 1972), xiv.
is effectively transcended. Wayne Proudfoot, eminent philosopher of religion, writes that any conflict between religious belief and scientific concepts is now simply “a naïve misunderstanding” of both.\(^9\) The philosopher John Caputo more whimsically argues that in this “post-secular” age, religion and science are not opposites, rather “the opposite of a religious person is a loveless person” or a “selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon.” Anyone who loves something madly is evidence of a “religion without religion.”\(^10\)

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Chapter One. The Problem of Universality

Lopez: Belief = historical and cultural Christian particularity
Discuss the evidence for the liberal assumption of universality, seen in Huston Smith, missionary history....

Role of emphasis of symbol in anthropology and HR’s Eliade. (Asad?)

First to suggest that the assumption that everyone believes something is a holdover from Christianity? Who? Hume? Evans-Pritchard
Challenging the Category of Belief

Universalism/particularism
The literature as a whole contains a two-stage critique of the category of belief, with linguistic/semantic scribbles about the terminology at both stages. At the outset there is the argument that this "universalizing" category cannot apply to those societies that do not formulate what they 'do' in concepts or reified in representations as Christianity has always done. The Christian baggage attending the concept of belief comes from its original and on-going context of religious diversity and contestation in which concepts or representations were clearly articulated (doctrines and creeds being the finished products) so as to define the precise object of belief and, by the same exercise, those objects of disbelief. Examples of this anti-universal particularism are the arguments by Donald Lopez, Rodney Needham, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Martin Southwold, and Jean Pouillon, etc. They ultimately imply the minimal integrity of nothing more than thick description (with any categories?), challenging basic assumptions in the meta-narratives of anthropology.

Belief/disbelief and science/religion
At a second stage, the context of diversity and contestation is seen as so intrinsic to the concept of belief that the concept forever carries the ambiguity of its own negation (what is formulated as that which is believed clearly implies that is can also be rejected, in disbelief), lodging the experience of doubt within the imagination of every believer. The possibility of doubt creates the demand for complete commitment and practices of constant affirmation; some analyses find that believers' belief/commitment sets up a type of contractual relationship with the deity in which the believer expects a return on the commitment. Generally, however, it is argued that social scientist inevitably cast believers as the irrational other; moreover, the context of diversity and contestation leaves no position that is not a position of belief and disbelief, including science and political ideologies which demand their own types of commitments in turn. From this perspective, and others too, science and religion are meta-phenomena that effectively define each other by the beliefs and disbeliefs to which they commit. Not able to recognize this defining relationship, it is argued, social scientists by their own self-definitions attempt to grasp what they will be unable to grasp (until they allow true self-knowledge?), namely, the 'other' of religious belief which is not other, or the rationality of religious practice; so they persist in the ascription of beliefs to the other that are what they imagine they would believe if they were not unbelievers. In other words, religious belief is not grasped in its own rationality, on its own terms, only in the language of negating assumptions of those who define themselves by their disbelief. Strands of this argument are found in Jean Pouillon, Micheal deCerteau, Susan Harding...

My generation of scholars was probably the last in which the majority had some first hand experience of religion. As believers turned unbelievers, we created as social science very concerned to maintain the boundaries. (E.g., the field of religious studies is not theological, it is the objective study of religion as a social and psychological phenomenon....). Increasingly social scientists are people with no prior experience of religion, to whom the boundary is clear but just asking to be transgressed.... They are able to be more than participant-observers: instead of translating the experience of the other, they put themselves in the shoes of the other and then translate their own experiences back.
Universal argument and counterargument = assumptions of the universality of belief (more or less) in contrast to arguments for its culture-laden provinciality/limitations. The latter extended into a fear that its use is a distortion, easily promoted by the interests of colonialism.

Evidence for universality of a term like belief is thin at best. Arguments against it are limited but compelling. However, the whole collision of views (not a debate!) evokes the issue of the status of analytical language.

Can folk categories ever be used? Refined for use? Is an analytical language (just terms that are constantly challenged?) desirable? If not, we can learn about each other only on a very limited way, since even to describe the culture of others, one needs to use culture-laden terms.

Those terms can be ‘refined’ by purposive historical and linguistic analysis BUT could end up with a set of terms far removed from standard use and thus a very esoteric discipline. Or terms can be refined, at least to some degree, simply be constant extensions of their use, as when cross-cultural interactions appropriate religion to cover practices that might not have figured in any more original sense of the term.

Terms are never frozen in history. They carry their history but they are not always passive to that history. When a term is adopted as a useful analytical term, all limitations noted, it continues its history.

Analytically languages run twin dangers: adhering too closely to folk meanings and become too far divorced from them. Fears of the hegemonic ambitions of an analytical language can be overstated, but not always, and surely the unwittingly, if colonially useful, effects are many.
religious person is a loveless person” or a “selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon”; anyone who loves something madly is evidence of a “religion without religion.” In one form or another, belief is a prominent on the current cultural landscape.

Even prior to this disorienting decade, it was something of a reflex for some scholars to speak of “the problem of belief,” especially philosophers and anthropologists. Naturally there is no single sense in which they all found the idea problematic. It is not even true that only so-called secularists perceived a problem with the concept. Sheer semantic spread suggests a few problems inherent to belief in popular usage. For example, the term is used for religious commitment to sacred truths as well as one’s degree of confidence in the reliability of a weather report. Some of the dilemma is caught in a line attributed to that old master of the language, W. C. Fields:

“Everyone should believe in something. I believe I’ll have another drink.”

Historically, of course, belief has been the focus of analyses of religion stretching from Irenaeus to Karl Rahner, David Hume to Donald Davidson, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith to Slavoj Žižek. To explore the concept of belief from its earliest roots to its modern conundrums would, of course, be an enormous, and therein quite scattered, survey. Such a project is not the purpose of this study. Rather, I shall simply probe the issues that seem most relevant to how the study of religion conducts itself today. This inquiry is meant to be more systematic than some of its immediate precursors, but no less focused than they on generating a conversation within the study of religion about this most basic of categories. Needham signals the challenge, considering it not only a topic unrestricted to particular academic disciplines, it also “has to do with fundamental premises of any humane discipline.” (xiv)

The Problem of Universality

A discrete number of scholars have struggled with the nature and distribution, both historical and culturally, of belief. While the nature of belief as a problem may appear straight-forward, it is...
actually approach quite distinctly for all. The most salient parts of their arguments are an
inescapable way of demonstrating a broad dissatisfaction with the implications of universality --
that all people can believe and do so in the same way -- easily attributed to the term.

A review of the literature, recent, reveals very similar concerns. On the one hand, there are
philosophical concerns rising from an analysis of language and communication: Wittgenstein
was particularly straightforward, wondering if believing was an interior experience, and whether
it was constituting by the thinking component or the doing. Other philosophers .... culminating
in Donald Davidson (see Frankenberry) who explicitly argues for the universality of believing as
the basis for communication (?). On the other hand, a body of more ethnographically-oriented
studies looks at the meaning of belief in cross-cultural communication and representation. It is
mostly this second group that addresses religious behavior. And they generally question three
assumptions about belief, namely that belief is universal, that it is a mental state, and therefore
that it is the personal experience of the individual. In questioning these categories, particularly
the first, studies have stressed examples that demonstrate the particularity of belief (location in
specific times and places; instability of meaning over time). References have also suggested that
believing may be better thought of residing in doing rather than thinking and that a persistent
sociocultural dimension to belief negates a focus on the psychological experience of the
individual.

The challenge to universality primarily rests on the apparent misapplication of the term to the
relationship that people in tradition societies have to their gods. Needham opens his study with
the experience of the impossibility of rendering “I believe in God” in Penan. Likewise Evans
Pritchard is loath to describe Azande feelings about .... with belief. Lopez takes the case furthest
showing how use of the category was a colonial distortion of indigenous culture. None of these
studies makes a formal point that traditional societies as some sort of group are not well served
by representing their relations to or thoughts about their deities in terms of belief; nor do these
studies conclude that non-traditional – e.g., modern, industrial, dominating – societies do have
religions in which belief is an appropriate term. To make these points begs many questions, such
as exactly what do you mean by belief, other than it is a Christian term? do all so-called modern
and traditional societies fall neatly on either side of the belief/non-belief divide? The French anthropologist Jean Pouillon has dealt with these issues most theoretically and succinctly...

Several scholars have explicitly attempted to describe what it means to believe, namely de Certeau, Veyne and Izutsu – usually in route to another goal.

The consistent reaction of ethnographers against use of the term is part of a new sensitivity to the distortions possible in translation and to fundamental differences in cultural constructions of religious cosmologies and divine interactions. Not new in the sense that only postmodern scholars of the late 1990s evidence this sensitivity. E-P writes in the 1930s. This sensitivity is new with regard to an earlier quandary in anthropological assimilation of diverse cultures. It was once asked if tribal, traditional societies actually had religion as such, since what they had appeared to differ substantively from religion as it was extrapolated from the Christian experience. The weight of history shifted to favor an expansion of the term to include more types of religiosity than ever before, with a simultaneous theorizing on the nature of religion beyond the historical conditioning of Christianity. David Chidester for one notes how long it took for Africans to be deemed religious, that is, as possessing religion. Accepting the wide use of the term religion, the next stage of collective concern about categories was reluctant to apply such a Christianized category as belief, or to de-christianize the category sufficiently starting either with a theoretical redefinition or by simply flooding/inflating the category with new examples. These latter efforts do appear in some works: Southwold writing on belief in Sri Lankan Buddhism works to refine the category as well as the religious activities in question so that he can include them as believers; the medieval historian Philip Arnold wants to recognize multiple mode of religiosity (specifically popular religion) that had long been deemed un-Christian as sincere sources of belief; not tampering with the nature of belief as a category, he suggests the belief-like nature of these popular religious arts and the vacuity of the historical criteria used to determine what counted.
While Hume is a natural place to start because of his exterior and critical position in trying to explain religion, but there is not an unbroken line of scholars so much as a question that had kept popping up. Hume is a resource for latter investigators, but their projects often differed the questions about belief per se have been considerably similar. In A Treatise of Human Nature (1739-40), Hume writes that belief as “an act of mind has never yet been explained by any philosopher.” (1888: 97n, edited ed.) Moreover, “this operation of mind, which forms the belief of any fact, seems hitherto to have been one of the greatest mysteries of philosophy” (Hume, 1888, p. 628) (Needham, p. 7 for Hume quotes).

When Durkheim broke religion down into the components beliefs and rites, he effectively established the basic sociological ‘fact’ that the supposed universality of religion extends to each of its constitutive elements. Was Durkheim influenced by the overlooked history of belief as an elemental and explicitly universal Christian category? Not long after Durkheim, but in another world of face-to-face ethnographic encounters, E.E. Evans-Pritchard weighted the ability of the term to translate Azande religious ideas. For E-P the Christian assumptions behind the term made it a distorting lens through which to get a true picture of ....

Features of the Christianization (does not predate Christianity?) of belief: universal, mental or interiority (not practice/performative), and therefore individual (not social). Does not have to be real early Christian understanding, just what critics ascribed to it as Christian features.

[Durkheim] on beliefs in more primitive forms of religion: find how he uses it as universal, mental and individual...

Evans-Prichard ‘30s (see Needham too)

Rodney Needham ‘70s

Needham opens his book with two questions that drive the comparative ethnographic investigation he launches, recasting Wittgenstein’s questions “is belief an experience” in more anthropological terms, he asks whether “the capacity for belief constitutes a natural resemblance...
among men” so as to require it be considered as a “human” faculty. (xiii) In other words, for his analysis, belief is tested as to whether it is a matter of a psychological state or experience, and if so does it take the form of an individual interiority or social constructed collective representations, or both. And in any of these forms is belief not universally human. He finds quite diverse ethnographic and analytic accounts have relied on the term. If Malcolm Ruel 80s?

Pouillan 80s?

Lopez
a) Main problems identified: Universal or particular; mental or performative; private or social. This is the supposed universality given Christian assumptions; the problem of implied individual/private existence, as well as the historical, political cultural “social fact.”

b) Many (all anthrop?) declare they cannot use the term (Ruel, Pouillan, Needham, Wulff, Lopez), tho others have productively done so (Southwold, Arnold, phil of rel ...?), Engelke and what-‘s-her-name?

c) History of religions/rel studies has not examined its use; in fact, it appears to deny its importance per se, but such unexamined assumptions can be very misleading, ill serving (leaving our discourse more theological?). Unexamined use of the term does make arguments rest on inherently theological (or about theology) grounds (distance from or ally with Wiebe?):

- historical exp of Christian credo formulation
- faith rooted in individual experience [cp ‘science’ explaining cognitive/biology of belief]
- ignoring how belief is used ethnically, politically, role of polls (census already noted);
Viswanathan, Lilla, etc
- Theorization of belief in theology (Reckwitz)

d) The problems resulting from or just accompanying the current particularism (when a theological-universal is rejected for particularistic; eg Needham; Evans Pritchard, etc) and post-colonial analysis (Lopez); benefits of particularism too, of course! Namely,

- the subtle reintroduction of universalist assumptions endemic to any posturing of “study.” Need to grapple with that!
- ramifications for any definition of “religion” and methods for its study, e.g. religious studies

[“Religion”: Paradigms plus: use Chidester on West slow to call others’ “religion”; also add JZS to argument about Christianity as prototype (see Guide to SofRel 41, Drugery 90) and his world religions research (before Masuzawa) Guide 11-42, Map 295?, Harvard Theo Rev ’96:295-6.]
e) Practice theory: value of a focus on believing and construction of a focus on practice; later look at multiple examples of believing from a comparative practice stance...
The problem of belief is shortsighted in light of any effort for particular issues involved in understanding the linguistic, epistemological role of belief. Aside from this academic argument, American culture is experiencing another installment of the confrontation.

Enlightenment vision between this strongest proceeds belief and reason. There are the Islamic challenges to modern secular culture, but some outcome is these have been, they are against the move. These background for another drama - the followers of evolution versus the followers of intelligent design in regard to the science curriculum. Belief & reason squint at again.
Tentative Contents

NEH proposal

PUP Proposal?

JZS Festschrift

History and Theory on Paradigms

SOAS revisions?

Marker for printed article “Chinese Believe in Spirits”

Oxford Talk on Declensions of a Problem

UCB Talk on Belief and Lopez challenge

Notes on Prayer

Notes on Tomoko’s chapter on Cognition in the Study of Religion
America is a nation of “believers,” we are told by one poll after another. The beliefs about which the population is polled conflate doctrinal tenets about the Bible with political positions on abortion and social views about the family. Since the emergence of the evangelical right in politics, the language of belief has become central to political discourse and, increasingly, social analysis. However, going back further in history to the Scopes trial, it is clear that “belief” — or not — then and there became central to the main forms of American identity.

Over the last ten years, a new wave of studies addressing ‘belief’ has appeared, a rich if often ragtag collection earnestly pulling in predictably contrary directions. Some studies don the mantle of traditional rationalism, explaining with horror or studied sympathy the unnatural persistence of religious or truly “weird” beliefs; others take up the guise of historical, social or postmodern examinations of the cultural, even economic, factors behind the dynamics of belief and unbelief. Despite the magnitude of the current fray, scholars of religion, specifically historians of religions, have not been effective contributors to the conversation. Apparently preceding generations of religion scholars conceded the idea of belief to theology, which would be in keeping with their efforts to distance the study of religion from the theological world in which it was born. So, for example, the 1986 and 2005 editions of the magisterial ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGION, first edited by Mircea Eliade, one of the main figures in the History of Religions, do not even carry an entry for “belief.” The reader is referred to “Doubt (and belief)” for an uncompromisingly specific theological discussion. Although the concept was then influentially deconstructed to its Christian roots (Lopez 1998), the term is widely used in every monograph in the field and related fields. Historians of religion do not know how to analyze the issue of belief as a working idea.

My project will first analyze the manner in which the concept of belief is currently addressed in order to demonstrate both a personal thesis about how to modify our concept of believing as well as a revised theoretical basis for doing so. I judge that the latter will encourage historians of religion to pursue methodologically coherent historical and cultural studies of the phenomenon—especially if they disagree with the former thesis. That thesis will center on the question of the relative value of defining belief in terms more universal than its Christian origins or defining it as a particularity of performance that cannot be presumed beyond the sphere of Christian influence. Ultimately, current uses of the term appear to require both approaches.

During my current sabbatical leave I planned the larger project and began the research. Given the enormity of the written sources pertaining to belief, this has been an exercise in determining which areas I must address and which I can avoid due to their more secondary, and all-consuming, nature (e.g., analytic philosophy). A published article, developed at a small
weekend conference with Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, Maurice Bloch, Terry Godlove, Jonathan Z. Smith and several others, helped me clarify how to use the rich store of analytical philosophy on belief/truth statements, such as pursued by Donald Davidson (Frankenberry, 2002). A more recent paper to appear in HISTORY AND THEORY contains an analysis of the construction of "religion" by Christian Euro-American culture that will be the groundwork for the rest of the project. The work I have done on cognitive theory, economic analyses, historical studies, and methodological analyses now enable me to shape a mature project and hazard a thesis.

I have worked for over twenty years with the larger issues of how to think about religion, which Durkheim defined so simply as a matter of rites and beliefs. My work on ritual theory is, of course, the best evidence of my qualifications to wade into this companion issue. My reputation is primarily based on my theoretical contributions to understanding ritual and religion, and I am constantly learning that this work has been picked up in other disciplines, most recently, history, classics, and archeology. My Sinological work exploring aspects of the "medium" in the message of Chinese religious texts, the topic of an earlier NEH grant, is also important preparation for the more material dimensions of how and what people believe. While drawing on this broad background in research, and years of teaching, I plan to refine my understanding of particular topics (e.g., the "will to believe," according to Nietzsche and Wm James) and broaden my grasp of some very recent developments (cognitive theory). However, I want this study of belief to return to themes that the history of religions has ignored since the rise of Eliade's phenomenology of religion, namely, the highly materialistic concerns long associated with religion in its so-called "primitive" forms—the quest for health, wealth, and life after death. Hence, my study aims not only to sort through the crowd of conflicting current work, and develop a methodological framework and thesis addressing the phenomenon of believing, it also intends to bring back into formal consideration the easily observable events in which a congregation prays for money, expects healings, or communicates with those on the other side. At some point, as the discipline increasingly focused on so-called “world religions” (Masuzawa 2005), we let these ways of being religious fall from consideration. Anthropology has been better at seeing them in religions abroad, while sociology has been better at tracking the middle-class search for spirituality.

I expect to spend the year completing my research in the areas noted below as well as fully drafting the most critical formulations and major thesis. The book will be finalized in a second year. In conversations with religion editors at Oxford and Princeton University presses, I have described this as a two-year project; due to the reputation of my previous work (and continued sales), each has pressed me on the manuscript. They also urged me to keep it accessible to the general reader. The success of Karen Armstrong's books make clear that an educated readership is hungry to understand religion better and they appreciate the association between our religious history and the current international environment. While my first book on ritual (1992) would not be considered generally accessible, even though it has been assigned to undergraduates, my second book was deliberately written in a more straightforward style. This “belief” project crystallized in the wake of the last two presidential elections, so I am intent on writing a book that can address both my colleagues in academe and the educated reader. But most of all, I want to do what I think I do best, namely, open up an area theoretically, inviting all comers to take the discussion further.

My particular strength in dealing with theory has made my work both distinctive and directly challenging to studies that have reigned in the field of history of religions. My rethinking of ritual overturned the supremacy, if not the enduring utility, of Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz,
and Jonathan Z. Smith on the topic of ritual. Likewise, by building on Donald Lopez’s influential deconstruction of our historical assumptions about belief, I expect to establish fresh ground on which to re-engage both the concept and the phenomenon we now mean to define with it. A study that redefines religion through an analysis of the overly familiar features of belief will contribute to the general discourse with which we discuss politics, values, and human diversity. This is an ambitious statement. I make it with a humility born of long experience in projects that never go in the direction one expects. At present it is, of course, an objective and an aspiration, but it is one that I believe I have the experience to pursue—and even presume in this description. In its scope this project is in keeping with the editor’s call in the March 2006 issue of the JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION asking the field to “not just produce more disconnected, atomistic goblets of knowledge,” leaving their “implications untouched.” (74:5) My hope to contribute beyond religious studies may not be unrealistic. I have been invited to participate in two events that show the interest of other areas, a Classics seminar at Oxford University on “faith” and a Sociology conference on “prayer” at Princeton University.

Aside from those events, I do not plan any travel. Languages are not an obstacle and I expect to draw on my familiarity with texts in Chinese popular religion. Beyond the excellent interlibrary loan services at my institution, I can use the nearby libraries at Stanford and Berkeley. Finally, the book is currently sketched out in chapters that are likely to slim down as my thesis takes on a more precise formulation. The following is a tentative table of contents:

I. Introduction: Praying for wealth, expecting the “last days,” thanking God that you were spared when others were not—the questions raised by these familiar scenarios are a place to begin in looking at what and how people believe affects the study of religion.

II. How Christians Came to Believe and Found Other Religions Believe Also (Don’t They?)—locating “belief” in enduring Christian paradigms of religion; the fundamental challenge of non-Christian “belief systems”

III. What about Truth? Current Arguments concerning “Belief”
   A. Traditional Rationalism—contrasting belief with the mindset of empirical proof; the Aristotelian heritage in Biblical studies; Enlightenment naturalism; American pragmatism; philosophy on belief statements and truth claims; the cultural context of scientific realism since Darwin; rational choice theory; the therapeutic psychology of belief
   B. The Rationalism of Cognitive Theory—evolutionary speculation; psychology of religious experience; neurological theories of the naturalness of belief; studies of the counter-intuitive
   C. Socio-Culturalism—the fate of classic theories; explorations of social memory; historical studies of power relations in belief/truth; postmodern critiques of belief and how religious studies pose its questions.

IV. The Critical Question: Is Believing a Form of Universal Cognition or a Culturally Particular Performative Action?—returning to the oldest and widely shared dimensions of religion, namely, praying for health, wealth and life after death; community and morality; individual and social frames; the perception of religious similarities and differences

V. Believing: a cultural way of thinking about a universal cognitive activity occurring in performative practices in which a cosmology and a social identity is acted/constructed through the formulas of word and deed; the dynamics of believing in religion, science, the marginal, hope; analytic language for talking about beliefs one does not share
Preface

As she was approaching ninety years of age, my mother began to talk more directly about God, what she believed, and whether she would be found wanting. As the child who studied religion, I got all her hard questions. Invariably, however, she would structure the conversation around the same points and what I had to say, whether challenging or soothing, never really mattered. "I'm not sure I believe or not. I certainly don't think it's likely there's the sort of God I was ever taught to believe in. It's hard to believe there is a God who cares about us. All I can do is hope that if God exists, he'll accept that I tried to understand and that I tried to live a good life -- that I did what I could." My mother did not want a theological response and she certainly had no use for the historical or comparative framing. She was trying to make things right, work out who she had been, in her own estimation, clarify what she could believe and what she was not comfortable invoking even at this late moment in her life. She inevitably wanted the comfort of being true to herself and, naturally, being on the right side of God should he exist. After all, she was sort of a believer "in her own way." She would begin and end these predominantly one-sided discussions with some simple questions: "Am I a believer or not? What counts as belief?"

There are many reasons to address the specific, and implied, questions of my mother. This book, however, will not even make the attempt. This book is something quite different, limited and, from my mother's perspective, hopelessly abstract. I would not presume to discuss topics for which I have no particular qualifications -- or track record of useful contributions. Yet I take up the topic of belief, in my own way, quite aware that for many people questions about belief are very personal and complicated. Hopefully, my more impersonal perspective confined to scholarly discussions does not lose sight of this. I decided to address the phenomenon of believing for several reasons, none of them quite so clearly distinct in my motivation as I can make them on paper. In the wake of my earlier work on ritual, I was reminded of a challenge to myself contained in the opening page of my first book on thinking about ritual, namely, to return some day to consider how the other component of religion identified in the simple Durkheimian definition of religion might yield to an analysis similar to the one in that work. Pursuing this, another reason for this book emerged: the surprising paucity of attention to this ubiquitous topic or category or phenomenon by scholars of religion. Some discussions exist -- counting on one hand, a finger or two is left over -- and they will be fully mined here. But they are quite polemical and often
limited in scope, rarely invoking the more expansive treatments of the topic in
related disciplines of anthropology, history, and philosophy. Finally, the silliness
of the recent public positions staked out by well-known writers and some eminent
scholars, fully convinced of the obvious rationality of their own reasoning, are the
mere top of a scholarly food chain. The new rationalism, however, better
represented by many more careful studies in the fast-paced flourishing of what has
come to be grouped as “cognitive theory,” may overfill the void with its own
distinctive manner of defining (away) the topic.

There are more general reasons to inquire into our ideas about believing. At a time
when European and American confidence in the exorable spread of secular
modernity is giving way to a new examination of the assumptions underlying that
self-interested ideology of Europe and America, the door has opened to take
religious beliefs more seriously. Religious strife, since that is the form in which
society generally notices religion, appears today not simply as another form of
class struggle, colonial liberation, or resistance to modernization. Rather, there is a
bit of a general consensus forming that ideas matter, cultures matter, religion
matters. At the same time, the insights of postmodernist and postcolonial studies
leave scholars of religion unable to pass through that door, let alone widen it or
explain what is on the other side, due to our resistance to essentializing those large
etties such as Islam and global Christian evangelicalism of current discourse. We
are effectively sidelined for the very current discussion to which we might actually
be relevant. We may also be hesitant to join in any general discussion of ‘beliefs’
per se due to the decades of scholarship on the body and embodiment or
performance and practice, as well as the highly nuanced discussions of what were
once cruder debates about oral versus literate cultures, or tribal versus creedal
religions.

These reasons for attempting a book on the huge and amorphous topic of belief
lead me to try to impose some order on our resources for addressing it. This book
does have a thesis; while clear, it is, in the spirit of the age, a bit of an anti-thesis:
affirming this, problematizing that, ultimately suggesting a shift of perspective to
afford a reasonable, and effective, way to deal with competing scholarly goals.
America is a nation of "believers," we are told by one poll after another. The beliefs about which the population is polled conflate doctrinal tenets about the bible, with political positions on abortion and social views about the family. Since the emergence of the evangelical right in politics, the language of belief has become central to political discourse and, increasingly, social analysis. However, going back further in history to the Scopes trial, it is clear that "belief" - or not - then and there became central to the main forms of American identity.

Over the last ten years, a new wave of studies addressing 'belief' has appeared, a rich if often ragtag collection earnestly pulling in predictably contrary directions. Some studies don the mantle of traditional rationalism, explaining with horror or studied sympathy the unnatural persistence of mild and extreme beliefs; others take up the guise of historical, social or postmodern examinations of the cultural, even economic, factors behind the dynamics of belief and unbelief. Despite the magnitude of the current fray, scholars of religion, specifically historians of religions, have not been effective contributors to any part of the conversation. Apparently the preceding generation of religion scholars ceded the idea of belief to the realm of theology; that would be in keeping with their efforts to keep distancing the study of religion from the theological world in which it was born. So, for example, the 1986 and 2005 editions of the magisterial ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGION, first edited by Mircea Eliade, one of the main figures in the History of Religions, do not even carry an entry for "belief." The reader is referred to "Doubt (and belief)" for an uncompromisingly narrow, theological discussion. Historians of religion do not know how to address the issue of belief. Although formally ceded to theology and influentially deconstructed to its Christian roots, the term is still widely used in every monograph in the field and related fields where the problems are noted but not resolved.

My project will first analyze the manner in which the concept of belief is currently addressed in order to demonstrate both a personal thesis about how to modify our concept of belief as well as a revised theoretical basis for doing so. I think that latter will encourage historians of religion to pursue methodologically coherent historical and cultural studies of the phenomenon, especially if they disagree with the thesis. The thesis of the project will center, I believe, on the question of the relative value of defining belief in terms more universal than its Christian origins or defining it as a particularity of performance that cannot be presumed beyond the sphere of Christian influence. Ultimately, current uses of the term require both.

During recent sabbatical leaves I planned the larger project and began the research. Given the enormity of the written sources pertaining to belief, this has been an exercise in determining which areas I can address and which I can avoid due to their more secondary, if all-consuming, nature (e.g., analytic philosophy). A published article, developed at a small weekend conference with Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, Maurice Bloch, Terry Godlove, Jonathan Z Smith and several others, helped me clarify the logic for avoiding the rich store of analytical philosophy on belief/truth statements, such as pursued by David Davidson (Frankenberry, 2002). A paper to
appear in *History and Theory* contains an analysis of the construction of ‘religion’ by Christian Euro-American culture that will be the groundwork for the rest of the project. Work I have done on cognitive theory, economic analyses, historical studies, and methodological critiques of the field of religious studies now enable me to shape the project and hazard a rough thesis.

I have worked for over twenty years with the larger issues of how to think about religion, which Durkheim defined so simply as a matter of rites and beliefs. My work on ritual theory is, of course, the best evidence of my qualifications to wade into this companion issue. My reputation is primarily based on my theoretical contributions to understanding ritual and religion, and I am constantly learning that this work has been picked up in other disciplines, most recently, history, classics and archeology. My Sinological work exploring aspects of the "medium" in the message of Chinese religious texts, the topic of an earlier NEH grant, is also important preparation for the more material dimensions of how and what people believe. While drawing on this broad background in research, and years of teaching, I plan to refine my understanding of particular topics (e.g., the "will to believe," according to Nietzsche and William James) and broaden my grasp of some very recent developments (cognitive theory). However, I want this study of belief to return to themes that the study of religion has ignored since the rise of Eliade’s phenomenology of religion, namely, the highly materialistic concerns long associated with religion in its so-called “primitive” forms—the quest for health, wealth, and life after death. Hence, my study aims not only to sort through a crowded and conflicting set of current work, and develop a methodological framework and thesis addressing the phenomenon of belief, it also intends to bring back into formal consideration the easily observable events in which a congregation prays for money, expects healings, or communicates with those on the other side. At some point, as the discipline increasingly focused on “world religions” (see Masuzawa), we let these ways of being religious fall from consideration. Anthropology has been better at seeing them in religions abroad, while sociology has been better at tracking the middle-class search for spirituality.

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BELIEVING
Catherine Bell

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II. How Christians Came to Believe, And Found Other Religions Believe Also (Don’t They?) -- locating “belief” in enduring Christian paradigms of religion; the fundamental challenge of non-Christian “belief systems.”

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   B. The rationalism of Cognitive Theory: evolutionary speculation; psychology of religious experience; neurological theories of the naturalness of belief; studies of the counter-intuitive.

   C. Socio-Culturalism – fate of classic anthropological theories; explorations of social memory; historical study of belief/truth in terms of power relations; postmodern critiques of belief and how religious studies poses its questions.

IV. The Critical Question: Is Believing a Form of Universal Cognition or a Culturally Particular Performative Action? returning to the oldest and most widely shared dimensions of religion: praying for health, wealth, and life after death; community and morality; individual or social frames; the perception of religious differences;

V. Believing – a cultural way of thinking about a universal cognitive activity occurring in performative practices in which a cosmology and a social identity is acted out through formulas of word and deed; the dynamics of believing in religion, in science, in the marginal, in hope; analytic language for talking about beliefs one does not share.
Bibliography

Fueled by the recent presidential elections and the longer-standing controversies over teaching evolution and intelligent design, there has been a fresh spate of books on belief and an increase in the venues in which this notion is bandied about. Scholars of religion, however, have practically avoided the term. The latest edition of the Encyclopedia of Religion (2005) makes no change in the earlier one's (1986?) omission of a separate entry for belief. The reader is directed to the entry for "Doubt (and Belief)." which is fully theological in its purview and assumptions. Two non-theological attempts to analyze the term (Lopez, "Belief" in Taylor's Critical Terms for the Study of Religion, 1998 and Robert Campany's article in History of Religion, 2000) suggest that any discussion of the it will quickly break down due to a variety of semantic problems; while Lopez sees no way to overcome these problems, and no particular reason to try, Campany optimistically predicts useful avenues for cross-cultural discourse. However, neither attempts to comes to terms with the way the notion of belief currently functions in the debates of our day, or whether the study of religion is avoiding the term as a way to avoid those same debates or preserve some paradigm.

The field of religious studies has been generated and propelled by a series of paradigms. The most central paradigm for all academic disciplines has been the Enlightenment's distinction between the rational world of empirical study and logical argument versus what they understood as the traditional cosmology of belief in God and acceptance of divine truths on faith alone. This paradigm has been beset, of course, by a number of ambiguities, not least of which is the role played by Biblical Studies in the emergence of European scientific and linguistic scholarship, among other areas, which did so much to bring about the Enlightenment. With reason versus faith (or belief) as the mental infrastructure of the modern world's understanding of science and religion, then postmodernist analyses of the culturalism of the sciences, which demand as much belief from the normal citizen as many of the wares religion offers, present yet another ambiguities underlying the modernist mindset. Cognitive science, relentlessly antagonistic to postmodernism, is still contributing to the project in both positive and negative ways. The work of Pascal Boyer differs greatly from the apocalyptic vision of Roy Rappaport, just as the breezy common-sense style of Justin Barrett differs from the density of McCauley and Lawson's work. Yet the new ways of mapping mental states explored in this scholarship lends continues to approach belief as a way of thinking while blurring the lines by which the mental is opposed to the physical.
The multi-disciplinary scholars of religious studies have more to offer. Aside from the few studies laying some groundwork, religious studies has the various empirical results of specific work in cognitive science, all the work in cultural anthropology, and the potential analytic data on the idea of belief in both popular and theoretical discourse. However, the most exciting material since Malinowski's treatment of religion, magic and science has been several disconnected studies by linguists and anthropologists exploring people's verbal activity in their construction of the social identity of "a believer." most notably Susan Harding's *The Book of Jerry Falwell* (2001). Since Paul Veyne's *Did the Greeks Believe their Myths?* (1988) and Paul Connerton's *How Societies Remember* (1989), anthropologists have also been exploring cultural transmission is ways that also unpack reliance on specific behavioral dynamics, notably architecture as much as oral tales.

I have published one essay to date on this enormous topic (in Nancy Frankenberry's *Radical Interpretation* [Cambridge, 2002], "'The Chinese Believe in Spirits': Belief and *Believing* in the Study of Religion." which was a paper presented to a small weekend seminar that included Richard Rorty, Maurice Bloch, Jonathan Z. Smith and Jeffery Stout, among others. Since the seminar was predicated on the work of the philosopher Donald Davidson's idea of "radical interpretation," my paper was able to engage the significance of the heavy load of philosophical studies of the verb "to believe" in order to design an approach that considers such philosophizing more as data for cultural study than a history of insights. Since then, I have pushed the project forward in a number of papers, notably a study of paradigms in Religious Studies to be published in *History and Theory*.

In planning the book manuscript, I am cognizant of the fact that the unexpected success of my first book, *Ritual Theory. Ritual Practice* (1992), which has been repeatedly cited for its major contribution to the field, was based on redefining the conversation about ritual in two steps. First, I demonstrated why the main theories of ritual (Durkheim, Turner and Geertz) appeared so useful, but were ultimately dead ends due to the circularity with which they played with the polarization of thought and action. Second, I suggested a fresh direction in which ritual was not a fundamentally distinct mode of human activity, but a strategic form of cultural practice like so many others. Its similarity to and its difference from other modes of practice, and the reasons why people would choose to ritualize a situation rather than deal with it another way provided unexpectedly rich ways of describing the ritual practices in their context. [During my years of work on ritual I also studied the ways in which *printed* Chinese morality books constructed a specific belief system (that is, cosmologically described morality) that was assimilated in a highly diverse culture offering many alternative systemizations.]

The *Believing* manuscript I am working on begins by tracing the role of the belief concept within the main paradigms constituting the modern study of religion, including the many verbal constructions that use the term in English (notably. W. C. Field's line -- "What do I believe? Well, I believe I'll take a walk."), as well as who and what are served by current uses. For example, Religious Studies depends on a number of interlocking paradigms, such as (i) Christianity is the de facto prototype for all religions, (ii) religion is fundamentally irrational. (iii) there are comparable "world religions," where the
"beliefs" are similarly described, (iv) religion is a cultural necessity, at least with regard to social morality, (v) the idea of religion is just a Western construct, and (vi) and perhaps the most diffuse and persistent, an underlying assumption, based on the foregoing, that religion is intrinsically good (when something awful occurs concerning religion it is usually ascribed to something like extremism or derangement). These paradigms are maintained by the "either/or" political-religious arguments that posit a false clarity between religion and science, on the one hand, and the political-religious agendas based on a false confusion of knowing and believing, on the other. In other words, continued understanding of believing as a mental state weak on real knowing (but perhaps rooted in a fundamentally humanizing experience something greater) serves purposes that must be unraveled to understand the perpetuation of the term. In their support of the preceding paradigms, popular notions of belief do not only support theology and religious studies, as we have known them, they also maintain ideas that are basic to the assumptions about modern science.

In a more positive light, the book will go on to develop a new model for understanding what it means to be a believer. I do not care to reject popular usage for some esoteric terminology; on the contrary, popular usage is more of a guide than theory. However, I do want to provide scholars with an approach to the idea, and its history, that gives them a more analytic, if less participatory, basis for study. My approach will analyze "believing" as an active, performative practice of social identification – not primarily a private, mental state of commitment to religious ideas. There is sufficient data available to be used creatively in this regard, particularly in developing the idea of "social identification" in a broader sense that mere group belonging. Going beyond Durkheim, therefore, I want to focus primarily on the main ways people demonstrate or act out belief to themselves and others, which involve a modest set of linguistic and performative actions that tend to revolve around particularly basic human concerns (not theological abstractions): concern with the dead, insuring the health and well-being of the living; and the desire to seek greater wealth by virtue of demonstrating religiosity to supernatural powers. These "basics" have fallen out of focus due to a concern with "the Sacred" and the complexity of ritual and theological detail afforded us by the accessibility of data from many disciplines.

This project will be the substance of the prestigious Gates lecture at Grinnell and the Eliot lecture at Reed College which I will deliver in March and April of 2007. Thus the heart (gist?) of the book could be complete by the end of this academic year, with another six months to elaborate a full manuscript for dissemination to outside readers.

If, as I have been repeatedly told, my 1992 book on ritual had an important influence on the field, then this book on believing, while standing on its own, will also complete the argument begun in 1992 about thought and action in the theoretical analyses of religion. Although I plan to write at least one more book, on those Chinese morality texts, I see Believing as my culminating contribution to the field of Religious Studies. Believing will demonstrate that Religious Studies is a multi-disciplinary field focusing on religion because religion is out there, that is, religion is widely assumed to be the entity that exists so influentially in our world. The field is not based on being covert believers, or the need
to rescue religion from the sciences, or because of any 'special' relationship to the Sacred (e.g., Eliade, among others), or due to a misunderstanding of the historicity of a term. I hope this argument will both validate the field and redirect it, from semi-theological categories to reflective explorations of functional equivalents to what we mean by religion in all the cultural forms this will take.

As I have written elsewhere, any "critical" study must first explain why the object of the study is seen as something to be explained in the first place, as a problem. Then it must analyze the history of the problem has been defined. That is for starters.
Belief: A Classificatory Lacuna and Disciplinary “Problem”

Catherine Bell

In a curious omission, the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, both the first and the revised second editions, 1986 and 2005 respectively, leaves out the term “belief” as the subject of a distinct entry. (Eliade 1986; Jones 2005) This may have been relatively unintentional and simply due to organizational problems involved in lining up writers with topics. The largest topics are always the hardest to assign and have accepted. And the *Encyclopedia* is a justifiably award-winning achievement by an international crew of major scholars, which has had important if subtle ramifications for unification of the study of religion. One should not overemphasize the presence of an absence. Yet it is interesting and perhaps important to note to this one. The inquisitive reader who turns to “Belief” is instructed to “See Doubt (and Belief),” for what the 2005 edition explains is a philosophical discussion of the interrelation of doubt and belief in the Western tradition” -- although quite theologically focused for nearly half the essay, with the addition of two useful sentences on dharma in India. (Jones 2005: 2423-2427). Belief is indexed in several other places in the final volume. The term and even the “Doubt” discussion of it are not in the Synoptic Index provided by both editions, which usefully classify “Religious Phenomena” and “Specific Religions,” like Christianity, with topics related to them. It is not listed as an example of “Phenomena of Religion,” which does include cats, clowns and cocks, to cite some random entries from just one alphabetical section, nor is belief considered under “Methods of Study,” “Philosophy and Religion,” or “Scholarly Terms.” The Index gives greater attention to “Faith,” but it also fails to appear in most of the preceding synoptical sections. Faith is noted in
discussions of individual scholars like Peter Berger and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, as well as increasingly encompassing entries such as “Calvin,” “Experience,” and “in” Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. On the whole, faith seems to be a term, if not a topic, which is more regularly invoked than belief in encyclopedia articles. One must conclude that belief was of sufficiently minor importance, from any angle, to religion as it was conceived by the scholars who organized and wrote for this definitive work in the field of history of religions and, one can conclude, religious studies in general.

The “Hastings” Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, which predates the Encyclopedia of Religion by some 80 years, includes an extensive and informative article on the topic, while The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion, edited by Jonathan Z. Smith and published about half-way between the first and second editions of Eliade’s encyclopedia, also addresses the topic in a entry of a comparatively good length. (Hastings 1908-26, reprint 1955; Smith 1995: 107-110) Critical Terms for the Study of Religion decided it was important, including a provocative chapter on the term by the Buddhologist, Donald S. Lopez. (Taylor 1998) Yet the Guide to the Study of Religion, which came out a few years after Critical Terms with a fuller list of topics, also chose to avoid this particular aspect of the popular imagination about religion. (Braun and McCutcheon, 2000).

One might also be confused as to the place of the term in anthropology. While any number of studies from E. B. Tylor through Emile Durkheim, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham, Clifford Geertz, and Talal Asad have specifically addressed the nature of “belief” and its place in understanding religion, it can be well represented in a popular anthology on the anthropology of religion, but not indexed at all in a reputable general introduction to the subject. (See Lambek 2002; Morris 1987) Still, anthropology has a clear record of explicit discussion of
the descriptive adequacies of the term belief, while history of religions cannot point to any except for the thoughtful work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. As founder of the comparative religions program at Harvard Divinity School, he never saw himself, nor was he seen, as a member of the so-called phenomenological school of study that generated the encyclopedia. (W. C. Smith 1977, 1979) Yet critiques of the theological tendencies in all these non-theological attempts at the study of religion rarely made such fine distinctions and Smith might have been a logical choice to contribute to the encyclopedia on the topic of belief. (Wiebe 1979)

The reasons behind decisions to include or exclude a topic in any particular taxonomy of religion, as opposed to the empirical sciences, may be nearly impossible to discern reliably. Jonathan Z. Smith’s attention to issues of classification and taxonomy with regard to religion as well as botany and the logic of classification in general is not merely a signal contribution to the self-awareness of the field. It is nearly legendary in his personal biography. His interest in the ordering of categories is the material of autobiographical reminiscence of precocious predilections rooted in the earliest of childhood pursuits. (J.Z. Smith 2004:19-25) It is not surprising, therefore, that he has articulated a clear rubric to distinguish the intent of a dictionary, handbook, and encyclopedia. While his account of each would make the topic of belief especially important to a dictionary, and perhaps less demanding of a handbook, it only makes the absence of belief from an encyclopedia more intriguing. For Smith, “an encyclopedia is essentially topical,” which means delineating something of all the resources and information needed to “explore a topic as a whole.” He cites Alexander Manuila’s “useful” description of an encyclopedia as “a comprehensive compilation of information on concepts pertaining to some or all fields of knowledge.” (2004: 164)
The absence of belief from Mircea Eliade’s encyclopedic project must be a result, direct or indirect, of an editorial perspective imposed on the enormously amorphous subject of religion. In his preface to the first edition, Eliade naturally laid out the goals of the encyclopedia, “conceived as a system of articles on important ideas, beliefs, rituals, myths, symbols, and persons that have played a role in the universal history of religions from Paleolithic times to the present day.” (Eliade 1986, vol. 1, xi) His explicit schema for the encyclopedia involved both historical descriptions and articles expressing contemporary interest in the structure and morphology of the "universal sacred." Eliade emphasized myths, symbols and, he notes, due to the spur provided by the modern desacralization of Western societies, the value of greater knowledge of primal religions. In the “Forward” added after his death, meant to supplement the Preface which had been merely drafted by Eliade, Joseph M. Kitagawa very systematically laid out further guiding principles of the encyclopedia project, explicitly comparing its focus to the earlier Hastings encyclopedia. In the various formulations given by these two editors, belief is barely mentioned. Rather the language used most often cites religious ideas, practices, and phenomena known to the human race, or the ideas, practices, and persons in the religious experience of humankind. In yet another formulation, Kitagawa invokes Joachim Wach’s three expressions of religion, the theoretical (doctrines, myths, and theologies), the practical (cults, sacraments, or meditations), and the sociological (religious groups and ecclesiastical structures). (Eliade 1986, 1: xiii) Only when specifying the “raw” data of religion, does Kitagawa, like Eliade, mention beliefs alongside “practices, feelings, moods, attitudes.” (1:xiv) Clearly this encyclopedia was meant to highlight the interpretive categories of the study of religion rather than systematically cataloging the “raw data” itself. If so, it might be seen less as an encyclopedia of religion than an encyclopedia of the study of religion, admittedly a fine splitting.
of hairs. but in keeping with the analyses the project has invited. (Smart 1988) Of course, J. Z. Smith’s rubric defines an encyclopedia explicitly in terms of providing the resources that would serve as tools for the study of a subject.

One aspect of the problem presented by this particular lacuna lies in the fact that the history of religions does not indulge in an overly esoteric set of interpretive terms as research tools. There are those introduced by Eliade, such as the sacred (arguably different from Durkheim’s), the sacred center, and the cosmogonic myth. The neophyte, moreover, will surely work hard to pin down the meanings of hierophany, morphology and hermeneutics. Eliade’s volume, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, identifies sky gods, solar cults, vegetation symbols such as the tree of knowledge, ritual orgies, and myths of renewal — altogether a more compact and unoriginal litany than that first developed proposed by his 18th and 19th century predecessors. (Eliade 1963) It is not difficult to understand that belief might not be deemed an acceptable "interpretive" category. yet its position as “datum” is exactly what concerned anthropologists like E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham, Martin Southwald, Richard Shweder, and Malcolm Ruel, who provide the fullest discussions. Overall, it is unsettling that history of religions as a field has failed to have any discussions of the term. Although it is ignored in all formal senses, the field makes nearly constant reference to the idea of belief in nearly every publication.

Aside from its questionable place in the history of religions, belief appears to be identified and defined in very different ways by such disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, and cognitive theory. Perhaps for reasons endemic to all of their discussions, it has become something of a habit to refer to it as “the problem of belief.” More than a few scholars go so far as to identify belief as the problem of their respective fields. (E.g., Shweder 1989; Viswanathan 1998: xvii) It certainly is a problem to attempt to define or analyze something as
widely referred to as belief. Even the scope of such terms as “love,” “hope,” and “hate” would not present as great a challenge since they rarely slip so easily from the position of datum to analytic category. In general, few terms have spread themselves so freely across the lexicon of European languages as belief, through its Latin derivations from *credo* or *fides*, its Greek form, *pistis*, or even the Hebrew *ḥe’mīn* (root ‘mn’). (Ruel 2002:101) Its uses are legion -- and bewildering. One can use the term in reference to a god of biblical qualities or one’s confidence in a particular television weathercaster. That old master of the English language, W. C. Fields, may have caught the crux of the dilemma with a characteristic pronouncement: “Everyone should believe in something. I believe I’ll have another drink.”

As for scholarly analysis of its use, the most significant literature easily stretches from David Hume (some argue for Fontenelle) to Donald Davidson, and from W. C. Smith to Slavoj Žižek. (Hume 1992 [1777]; Davidson 1984; W. C. Smith 1977; Žižek 2001) Useful studies include the work of Paul Veyne on the historical imagination, Paul Connerton and Danielle Hervieu-Léger on cultural memory, Pierre Bourdieu on practical logic, and Michel de Certeau on psycho-social interpretations (Veyne 1988; Connerton 1989; Hervieu-Léger 2000; Bourdieu 1980; de Certeau 1984, 1985) Among the anthropologists noted above, Needham, Southwald, and Ruel have been the most explicit and contentious in a long interpretive, and re-interpretive, discussion launched by Durkheim. He classified all religious phenomena into “two basic categories: beliefs and rites,” defining religious beliefs as the essential element of religion, the “representations that express the nature of sacred things” (Durkheim 1969 [1912]: 51, 62). The theological tradition is even more extensive, of course, stretching from Tertullian to Tillich, Irenaeus to Rahner, with pertinent commentaries along the way by Alisdair MacIntyre, W. C. Smith, and Peter Berger, to name a few. (MacIntyre 1957; Berger 1967) Many have insisted that
Christian categories of belief are so endemic to Euro-American culture that they inevitably insinuate themselves into any study of religion, making the "beliefs" of other traditions a common but misleading expression. More than 20 years ago, Needham and Southwald took up contrasting positions on the ethnographic situation, while Paul Veyne went off in another direction completely to discuss the complexities of any history of beliefs among the ancient Greeks. (Needham 1972; Southwald 1979, 1983; Veyne 1988) Shweder identified the issue of belief as the "fault-line" in the field of anthropology, while in an extended argument against the usefulness of the term, Ruel cited W. C. Smith on the Christian presumptions in the term. (Ruel 2002) These conversations continue, most recently with Donald S. Lopez casting belief as yet another example of Christian colonialism in the guise of ultimately obfuscating scholarship. (Lopez 1998) At the same time, however, belief is the recipient of unqualified attention in new work being done in cognitive psychology and bio-evolutionary theory. (Boyer 2000; Barrett 2004; Atran 2002) All of these sources of input allow one to conclude that belief is clearly an issue in human reasoning and communication, cognition and memory, psychological orientation and social conditioning, theological reflection, as well as modern analyses of secularism and even human evolution. If so central to the work of other fields, the is not unlikely that history of religions' lack of theoretical interest lies precisely in our routine reliance on its nebulous status as some sort of raw data or biased theoretical tool.

It is interesting to note that in contrast to the complexity of its presence and absence in academic discourse, belief is all over the popular press, which relentlessly simplifies it into oppositions such as belief and reason. The popular press is particularly ready to expose the problems posed by belief and believers. Several years ago I noted such studies on the silliness of religious beliefs as Wendy Kaminer's *Sleeping with Terrestrials: the Rise of Irrationalism and*
the Perils of Piety and Michael Shermer’s Why People Believe Weird Things. (Kaminer 1999; Shermer 1997; Bell 2002) Since then, reactions to the terrorism of 9/11 in America have come into print, soon joined by equally intense reactions to the decision by the state of Kansas school board to introduce “intelligent design” along side evolution in the state’s science curriculum. (See Talbot 2005) Although this decision was successfully challenged in court, and half of the school board was subsequently voted out of office, the specter of religion creeping into science classes continues to provide grist for the mills of scholarly indignation. Among popular works, Sam Harris has published two that attempt to preach rationalism to the unconverted religious, The End of Faith and Letter to a Christian Nation; but their influence is dwarfed by the similar efforts of the specialists, Breaking the Spell by the philosopher of science Daniel Dennett and the God Delusion by the well-known Oxford scientist, Richard Dawkins. (Harris 2004, 2006; Dennett 2006; Dawkins 2006) All extol the value of rationality in a world dangerously misled by religious irrationalism.

These opinions constitute the latest chapter in Western culture’s perpetual polarization of belief and reason, faith and rationality, religion and science. The Enlightenment articulated the issues most clearly, of course, in a variety of formal documents and social reorganizations, articulating the poles of this dialectic. Yet we are still seeing our culture in terms of faith versus reason even though we often seem to live in a very post-Enlightenment world. The Enlightenment paradigm now encodes a wide variety of American ideological if not material interests, specifically involving biblical religion versus Darwinian science. Scientists, theologians, and hack writers all contribute to a fray that politicians have been very willing to exploit. All start from the same stark duality in which science is the natural opposite of religion, each pole alert to restrain the power wielded by the other. Only a savvy journalist or two has
suggested in passing the degree to which this simplistic view of religion and science is a play of shadow puppets manipulated by interest groups on a political playing field. In the end, the paradigm of reason versus belief remains deeply ingrained in the discourse of modern culture even though it may not be a very good depiction of the actual conditions of modern culture.

In the academic discipline of philosophy, quite beyond the machinations of the popular press, the qualities of belief are not opposed to reason and simplified Enlightenment dichotomies have been left behind, although not forgotten. The views of thinkers from Hume to Wittgenstein are often surveyed at this point to illustrate a lively philosophical tradition, continued by such late 20\textsuperscript{th} century figures as Stuart Hampshire, Gilbert Harman, and Richard Rorty, with Rorty evoking the lineage of American pragmatism from William James through John Dewey. In an earlier publication I focused at some length on the American philosopher Donald Davidson in order to understand better the "problem of belief" as it figures in current philosophical analyses.

In striking contrast to the popular perspective, his philosophy generally thinks of belief as a \textit{universal} quality, playing an integral role in a basic holism (not a division) interlacing thought and action in general. Davidson argues that a level of broad agreement is the condition for any linguistic understanding of each other. (Note Godlove, 2002: 10) Asserting that "belief is central to all kinds of thought," he explains that belief is what allows us to take for granted general perceptions of the material world that are basic to the formation of thoughts, spoken statements, and the conditions needed to understand each other. Belief and meaningfulness are dependent on each other and have a formal role in the act of interpretation. More specifically, Davidson argues that we have to believe that the statements someone makes are or can be true, even if we conclude he or she is lying, mistaken, or crazy. Thus we must infer belief to grant the meaning needed to make the most basic act of interpreting each other. (Davidson 1984:156).
This is enough to illustrate the contrast philosophy presents to the popular view opposing belief with the meaningfulness of reason; instead of making belief the weak of half of this type of dualism, a philosopher like Davidson locates the problem of belief in the universal act of person-to-person interpretation.

In the closely intertwined disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology and cognitive theory, the problem of belief also concerns the degree of holism that is understood as basic to social understanding. Yet these fields would not use Davidson’s terminology, so comparing their views of belief is a more delicate project. It is fair to conclude, however, that for most scholars of culture, belief involves the problem of universalism versus particularism. That is, on the one hand, what can we assume to be common to all people simply by virtue of our shared evolution, history, or simply the human condition; on the other hand, what should be considered culturally particular to a social practice even if subject to forces of diffusion that can push practices beyond an original point of germination. Universality may mean common to all social life or simply mentally accessible to all. In the latter case, because one is familiar with belief in the God of the Abrahamic religions, one may feel, rightly or wrongly, that one has some mental access to how ancient Greeks believed in their pantheon of gods.

Particularism suggests that we have no such access to the experiences of another religion and, indeed, can only make sense of what is so foreign by attempting to reconstruct, more or less accurately, a system of ideas in which specific pieces can be illuminated. By the time any universal or particularist project is underway, it is probably rife with assumptions and precarious leaps of logic. Yet, at the same time, it is easy to see a measure of common sense to both positions – that we can understand something about other human experiences and we should not assume that we can understand anything about them.
As I have noted elsewhere, Shweder conducted an exemplary project to attempt a reasonable synthesis to the opposition of universalism and particularism. He clarified all the different versions of the arguments for both sides and then developed a resolution, self-consciously postmodernist in its idealism, in which he argued that opposites need not be opposed! Shweder maintained that the discipline of anthropology was itself the product of a collision between our notions of universality and particularity, which, like continental plates, created a "fault-line" easily illustrated by any number of vexing scenarios that routinely come up for the anthropologist. Indeed, he suggested, should anyone truly resolve such scenarios, anthropology as we know it would probably not be needed any more; the whole field would collapse. A typical "vexing" scenario is what he calls the "witch question" -- which in fact is not that removed from the possible experiences of a normal citizen in a multi-cultural society. Accord to Shweder, the witch scenario unfolds when your informant, the person on whose judgment you have so greatly relied, takes you aside to admit to being a witch, a confidence that might possibly involve some personal danger to the one making it. You come from a tradition that does not believe in witches, so how do you accept the statement by your informant -- as true or not true? Do you believe it or not? (Shweder 1989: 109-110; Bell 2002: 106-07).

With the argument that the interpretation of beliefs is the central anthropological question and the distinctive fault-line of the discipline, Shweder's answer is two-fold: unquestionably, the person is a witch (in this way he recognizes the culturally relative and particular), but as the anthropologist who must reconstruct the system of ideas that "makes sense" of this belief, he claims a type of "transcendence" of the particular and the relative (thereby recognizing the universal in some form). Shweder hastens to add that this sense of transcendence must not be accompanied by any sense of superiority, since one culture is simply using its categories to
interpret another, an operation no doubt being performed by the informant as well. Instead, he wants to establish a position of relative “transcendence without superiority” with regard to the “realities” that another culture presents to one’s own categories. (Shweder 1989: 133) I think that Shweder has, in fact, described one of the ways we negotiate the fault-line, not how we might resolve it. Anthropology may be safe for another day. While less developed than Shweder’s, Talal Asad also attempts an anthropology of non-universal, fully particular assumptions and categories, as does Jonathan Z. Smith in several analyses, most notably “Religion, Religions, Religious,” and “Manna, Mana Everywhere and /u/ /u/ /u/” (Asad 1993; J. Z. Smith 1998, 2002).

In contrast to the parsing of the problem of belief in anthropology, the term presents few concerns for cognitive theory, a field that is currently the locus of much excited debate by scholars of all types. Composed of psychologists, neurologists, evolutionary biologists and all the subfields in between, cognitive theory gives a great deal of attention to why and how people believe. One recent title makes this explicit: “Why Would Anyone Believe in God?” (Barrett 2004) The most general “short” answer identifies believing as a cognitive process selected for its adaptive value in the evolutionary task of human beings surviving in stable groups. This makes believing part of what created thinking/social humans, although some cognitive theorists are quick to point out that it is a vestige of evolution that ill equips us for modern life. Despite its focus on the etiology of belief, cognitive theory simply defines it as positing the existence of what “counter-intuitive agencies.” (Boyer 2001) So, while philosophers regard religious believing as just one instance of the larger cognitive phenomenon of belief, the former is the main focus of cognitive theory. Most cognitivists are unabashedly “scientific,” intent on explaining why the irrational beliefs of religion came into existence and remain long past their more obvious adaptive uses.
For those in the fields of neurology, the neurophysiology of cognition, or evolutionary biology, interest in religion is tied to new research tools like magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) as well as the sheer synergy of these fields coming together around new maps of the brain and paradigms of consciousness and neural processing. Their apparent lack of hermeneutical interest in the challenges posed by language is in keeping with the style of science generally, but can make their work very alien to humanists. When they locate “the problem of belief,” they solve it, that is, they explain what is going on. Even when their explanations can only be speculative at best, the cognitive theorist sounds very reductionist to scholars concerned to interpret (verstehen) rather than explain (eklaren). Some of these theorists are not blind to the dilemmas of social science or even the humanities, but they are unusual “cross-over” figures. (See Atran 2002; Pyysiäinen 2004; and Turner 2002).

The late anthropologist, Roy Rappaport, used cognitive theory, among other methods, to develop a speculative but insightful account of the nature of belief. He assumed its biological evolution and focused on the dynamics of its social enactment, through which an experience and concept of “the sacred” was generated among human beings, functioning in turn to mold them as human beings. This social process involved -- as Vico, Comte, and Hume all suggested -- an experience of power and an act of submission to the idea of a higher authority. Rappaport playfully described the concept of power in this way: “The unfalsifiable supported by the undeniable yields the unquestionable, which transforms the dubious, the arbitrary, and the conventional into the correct, the necessary, and the natural.” (Rappaport 1999: 405) The process of deferring the quality of unquestionableness to the unknown comes to constitute sanctity itself. As a form of absolute authority, the sacred makes possible “the foundation upon which the human way of life stands.” For Rappaport, belief in sanctity enables humanity to evolve social
community, intellectual reflexivity, and the experience of transcendence itself. (Rappaport 1999: 293-97, 395-405)

The idea that religion may be a selected adaptive feature in human evolution is far from new: in some form it goes back to the oldest pre-Darwinian notions of social evolution evinced in 18th century writers. Even mid-twentieth century phenomenological theorists of religion, like Eliade, who regarded religion as *sui generis* or non-reducible to other forces, could speculate about the evolutionary origins of religion before confining discussion to the “phenomenon” at hand, the origins of which should not matter. Yet the phenomenology of religion approach, now known as history of religions, has been significantly lax in comparison to its disciplinary neighbors in pursuing belief beyond old questions of its origin. Perhaps the more need in the last decades to distinguish itself from theology on the one hand and anthropology on the other might explain this odd lacuna in centuries of analysis. Perhaps the absence of belief as a discrete entry in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* contributes to the very definition of the borders of the phenomenological study of religion. Nonetheless, with an exception here and there, colleagues in the history of religions, when compared to philosophers, anthropologists and even cognitive theorists, have not seen any “problem” with belief. In fact, we may need to be prodded to see belief at all.

In 1972 Rodney Needham noted the expedient ease with which many ethnographers blithely claimed that such and such people believe in this or that god and gods, comfortable with the assumption that the English verb “to believe” captures the particular religious sensibilities of a very different people. Of course, as the Shweder discussion made clear, a universal assumption about the know-ability of other peoples and cultures has been basic to anthropology. Yet in contrast to those who found belief everywhere, Needham pointed out the close attention to local
terms first used by Evans-Pritchard in his study of the Nuer and their theology. Needham himself examined the indigenous terms for anything comparable to belief among the Navaho, Hinduism, the dialects of the Philippines, and the Penan of Borneo, an exercise that evinced "the bewildering variety of senses attaching to words ... indifferently translated by the English 'believe'." (Needham 1972: 32-37)

Most recently, the Buddhologist Donald Lopez analyzed the term belief for its usefulness in the study of religion, challenging the basic assumption of universality. For Lopez, our notion of belief as something common to all religions is part of our blindness to difference and our willingness to convert the world to one way of thinking. He argues that what we intend by belief has a clear historical locus in the matrix of meanings forged by early Christianity and developed in the course of Christian history as it sought to define its theological orthodoxy and institutional jurisdiction. (Lopez 1998) In fact, it was during the Inquisition, in-fact, that belief acquired its current distinctive gloss by which outward action is deemed an inadequate indication of the views one harbors deep within the heart. Only torture would reveal those sentiments.

Lopez illustrates his point with the dramatic narrative of Peter of Verona, a 13th century preacher asked by Pope Gregory IX to launch an Inquisition against the Gnostic heresy of the Cathars or Albigensians. This early Inquisition actually institutionalized testing a person for his or her true beliefs. But Lopez also notes that how deeply the Inquisition was involved in both the confiscation of property, which certainly added to the local zeal of the movement, and in the struggle between the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor for political control of a great deal of southern France. Peter of Verona, early Inquisitor, eventually became a martyr to the cause: the story has it that as he was dying from a stab wound, he inscribed "credo," the beginning of the orthodox creed of beliefs, on the ground in his own blood. The credo, of course, points back to
the long historical importance of oral and public assertion of creeds that arose in the context of disputing heresies. However, summing up a great deal of history in this one brief historical sketch of Peter the Inquisitor and martyr, Lopez concludes that Christianity came to distinguish belief *not* by what a person *said* publicly, but by “the invisible content of the mind.” (Lopez 1998: 26-27) Since the means for identifying believers from non-believers would give great power to the one deciding who had what in their hearts, Lopez also concludes that the idea of belief “is neither natural nor universal. It might be described as an ideology, an idea that arises from a specific set of material interests.” (Lopez 1998: 28)

Using a second example, Lopez describes the 1881 *Buddhist Catechism* with which Colonel Henry Steele Olcott sought to bring Singhalese Buddhism into the modern world. In Olcott’s understanding, Buddhism was a religion and, therefore, a system of beliefs. So he was shocked by how poorly the pious monks of Sri Lanka could recite back to him the basic beliefs that early translations had made so familiar to Olcott. He was especially concerned that ill-prepared Buddhists would not be able to hold off the growing influence of Christian missionaries who were destroying the indigenous culture. Pointing to Olcott’s “ideology of belief,” Lopez suggests that his assumptions about the universal nature of religion were rooted in Christian history and doomed, inadvertently, to obfuscate a true understanding of Buddhism. (Lopez 1998: 29-33)

Lopez’s argument for the cultural particularism of belief is welcome for taking up the topic of belief at all, even if his conclusions banish the term for reasons provided by a postcolonial perspective. Yet it is not obvious that his analysis actually manages to remove Christian assumptions, and agency, from the center of the historical record, rather than further crediting Christianity with a religious perspective it may simply have inherited, borrowed, or
patched together. Nor does the subsequent history of Christianity in formerly colonized cultures
deserve less study or respect for reasons of an historically explicit act of obfuscation.
Unfortunately, it is also not clear that Lopez’s provocative and exhilarating analysis will have
much of an impact on the history of religions’ passivity toward the longstanding controversies
surrounding belief, only a few of which Lopez is able to engage. After all, a fundamental
assumption about the unity and transparency of believing as a phenomenon has supported the
whole enterprise of comparative religions and most “world religions” textbooks. Obfuscating
ideology with material interests may be too much of a challenge. Still, Lopez’s argument about a
“critical term” puts the right questions to the historical record and effectively challenges the
history of religions as to the degree of universality we can continue to comfortably assume as
well as the degree of particularity with which we may want to rewrite our master narratives.
How the field deals with such a challenge could well predict its ability to survive in the twenty-
first century.
WORKS CITED


FOOTNOTES

1 The author would like to thank Lindsay Jones for his generous assistance with part of this project, although the final argument reflects only the opinions of the author.

2 Religious Studies 24, no. 11 (March 1988) featured seven review articles, while the Journal of Religion 70, no. 3 (1990) was a special issue dedicated to review articles on the Encyclopedia. Also see Smart 1988.
From note (17) In a more recent and distinctly new current within the field, the anthropologist Matthew Engelke reminds us that the path breaking anthropologists of the twentieth century, E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner, who both spent years in the field participating in the elaborate ritual life of the Nuer and the Ndembu, respectively, each converted to Catholicism after a few restless years back in the halls of academe. Perhaps after years of close involvement in the highly structured ritual lives of these communities, and then the relative sterility of the rationalized modern technocratic state, Catholicism presented the closest answer to a ritual life with a similarly embracing complexity. (Matthew Engelke, The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on ‘the inner life’ "Anthropology Today 18, no. 6 [December 2002]: 3-8) Engelke also wonders if the attempt to understand one religion can leave one in a better position to understand another. In this case, Evans-Pritchard’s and Turner’s understanding of the African religions they documented so well might have given them insight and empathy for a religion closer to home. Engelke seems to be innocently raising anew an issue that, in a version only slightly different, marked the birth pains of the degree-granting discipline of the non-theological study of religion, namely, does one have to be a member of a religion to truly understand it. As just stated, the question implies that outsiders engaged in the formal, secular study of religion could not really understand Catholicism or Nuer or any other religion. Today it is easily granted that such a scholar would understand the religion differently, indeed, be engaged in answering very different questions than those of concern to practicing members of the religious community. Through the 1960s, however, this issue involved a lengthy and occasionally contentious process of differentiation as the study of religion carved out a place for itself alongside the other disciplines devoted to religion – theology, scripture, and ministerial studies, among others. (See J Z Smith article [in his folder] and in Relating Religion?)

from text (19) Ewing describes how the circumstances of her dreams left her wobbling in her confidence as an objective ethnographer. To an extent not clear to herself, she became a type a believer and, therefore, an insider—someone who understood and was told more. Yet going native can leave one unable to explain any of this insider information to one’s professional community by virtue of vows of confidence, or simply the inability to convey the convincing insider experience.

Paradigms Behind (and Before) the Modern Concept of Religion

Abstract

This essay identifies five paradigms, undoubtedly among many more, which are basic to understanding the historical emergence and uses of the generic idea of "religion" in the Christian cultures of Europe and America. The spread of this concept has been sufficiently thorough in recent centuries as to make religion appear to be a "social fact," to use Durkheim's phrase, rather than so many cultural expressions and different social practices. The supremacy of Euro-American culture—and an academy still saturated with Christian ideas—has enjoined other cultures and forms of religiosity to conform to this idea of religion; for these cultures contentment with the status quo can vie with the anxieties of influence, including "modernization." The key paradigms discussed are the following: Christianity as the prototype; religion as the opposite of reason; the modern formulation of "world religions"; the cultural necessity of religion; and then critical analysis of the Western "construction" of religion. These paradigms demonstrate the limits on theoretical variety in the field, the difficulty in making real changes in set ways of thinking, and productive foci for interdisciplinary methods of study.
Introduction: Paradigms and Religious Studies

Some projections of current global political and economic forces suggest that religion could eclipse nationalism and ethnicity as the source of future friction and fighting. Samuel Huntington's much critiqued fear of a coming "clash" of religious civilizations may or may not prove correct in the end, but there is no question that here and now many local clashes as well as pervasive global tensions are routinely iterated in terms of the different goals of religious cultural traditions—from the political speeches of George W. Bush to those of Omar Bin Laden.¹ Yet are the multiple social and cultural differences involved in these current clashes adequately, or usefully, described as religious? Even before Huntington, of course, scholars with historical or anthropological backgrounds invoked the notion of "religious cultures" in order to express both the power of religious socialization over time and space, as well as the vague inadequacy of the idea of religion itself in capturing the full scope of the social traditions and mores involved.² But historians should be wary of any fresh reification of religious identities. The clearest example of the many tissue layers that build up into some popular nominalization of a religious tradition can be found. I believe, in even a cursory exploration of the paradigms that have constructed the notion of religion itself. Such an examination makes clear the obvious, that "religion" is an historical term like all other terms and phenomena. That is, it emerged at some point in time with a set of uses and was pressed into much wider application when it became useful in naming something that previously did not exist or did not need a name.

The analysis that follows is an initial and therefore somewhat idiosyncratic exercise to try to isolate both some key layers among the paradigms that have shaped our notion of religion, as well as the variety of explorations emanating from these paradigms that are shaping the field of religious studies. However, it must be said that I am not an historian and can show little respect
for disciplinary boundaries. In addition, I draw on far too much material to do so well in all cases. My goal, however, is some sense of the construction of an evolving term that remains very critical today, although with what one suspects must be constant changes of emphasis in the facets that unfold. My working premise that this historical process is not necessarily a logical or internally directed one may allow for a light touch in repeatedly shuffling through the cards of history, trying to catch a glimpse of a partial storyline or simply consistency of discontinuities.

In brief, my storyline is to explore a handful of key paradigms that have been and still are basic to academic understandings of religion in a number of fields. I use the term “paradigm” here in its most neutral sense, as a basic tool for advancing knowledge as a social enterprise. Moreover, while using the general ethos and particular aspects that Thomas Kuhn’s gave the term, I am not attempting to invoke any of his specific arguments (at this time) or to open any interpretive fuss about his meanings. Conventionally, we understand paradigms to be those overly convenient and under-theorized terms that create the theoretical scaffolding for all sorts of other ideas. Eventually, however, people can notice some of the assistance provided by the paradigm and even suspect it of having an ideological function. From this perspective, to call something a paradigm is already to recognize it as a type of “black box” or “knot” of ideas operative in our discourse and raises questions about why a paradigm may be so useful to a particular subject. I hope the irony of the situation is clear: paradigms are the building blocks for systems of knowledge until we are actually perceive the degree to which we assume their support. At that point we fear that the linked imagery of the paradigm may constrain thought as much as facilitate it. Its efficacy suddenly too apparent, we are bound to inquire why we found this way of seeing things so constructive and whether we should rethink the model and possibly retire it—if we can.
To explore paradigms such as those constitutive of the idea religion is like unpacking a set of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls, always another within the last one. It might also be compared to uncovering archeological strata that provide a picture of geological ages containing, perhaps, some of the detritus of human history, like the carbonation of ancient campfires or a fossilized set of footprints on an ancient lakeshore. It makes sense to imagine these paradigms as historical stages only if it is clearly understood that few facets are ever left behind. Even if the outermost cultural carapace of historical style is discarded, the associated ideas, both structured and structuring, can remain to hold most of a worldview in place. One easy example is seen in the field of Religious Studies today: it is a tent so large that there are all sorts of sub-communities distinctly rooted in marginal paradigms of religions still able to thrive in the darker corners, often with their own journals, websites, and membership lists. While we may challenge the integrity of the edifice, even work to knock down some big sections of it, there are basements and rafters of suppositions with annexes of linked structures, all of which hold a great deal of the original paradigm together no matter how fully we attack it. Paradigms are anything if not redundant. Yet I cannot think of any more serious focus of intellectual exploration in the field.

Optimistically, tracing some of these boxes within boxes may suggest other major constructions and interpretations attending the way we study religion or simply how we talk about it. Most of the first part of this paper would be relatively uncontested by my colleagues, and some of my points are shortcuts through larger studies underway. Yet I will also try to suggest a style of inquiry consistent with the challenge of these paradigms, a challenge that may redress the current sense of limited choices and directions in the study of religion. Certainly, I can provide examples of the difficulties of trying to undo a paradigm. The smaller models I have explored at length include traditional views of the uniqueness of ritual action, the cosmological
medium of the text and, currently, our cultural beliefs about beliefs. On the surface the latter may seem like a robust, free-for-all economy of ideas, but tensions and increasing rigidity are the result, with little relation to traditional sources of authority or discernment. Hints of another paradigm lie in an attitude deeply ingrained within scholars in religious studies— or else we would be historians—namely, the assumption that religion is fundamentally good, embodying the noblest of human ideals and distilled wisdom, if not sacred history and commands, despite the obvious human lapses everywhere. Theoretically speaking, the field of religious studies has not really moved much beyond such starting assumptions. Even if we have trendier reference points, deeply ingrained paradigms are still used to explain us to ourselves, enabling us to invoke a common pool of ideas about religion with few attempts to pull aside the curtain.

Boxes within Boxes

Christianity as the Prototype

It is necessary to choose a beginning, a first box, even though the choice may be ultimately arbitrary. So I will start with the enduring paradigm created with the solidification of Christianity as the prototype for religion in general. The ascendancy of Christianity in Europe—gradually spread by missionaries, travelers, and a variety of military and cultural colonizers—made it seem natural that Christianity be taken up in the European cultural milieu as the frame of reference for what religion is. As the prototype for religion, Christianity provided all the assumptions with which people began to address historically and geographically different religious cultures. In other words, as the prototype for the general category of “religion,” an idea that needed to emerge itself. Christianity was the major tool used to encompass, understand, and dominate the multiplicity. Yet there is more to this prototype than any quick nod of
understanding. The long and varied history of Christianity that naturally continues into our time has been subject to processes of dissemination and appropriation (or “inculturation,” to use church language) that created in turn a great many Christianities throughout the world from the very beginning. Many have long been lost to history, others seriously understudied, an example of how scholarship can aid the often cruel processes by which the history of Christianity has appeared so much “neater” for 2000 years than it actually was—or is.4

Nonetheless, even as practiced by reservation Sioux, Russian Orthodox, or the Independent Churches of South Africa, the fact that so many peoples regard themselves as Christian means that, aside from its political and numerical dominance, the Christian prototype for “religion in general” to believers, non-believers, and scholars is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, and not likely to change soon despite the tensions accruing in academic circles. Chinese and Japanese of the 16th through the 19th centuries would frequently reply to close questioning that they did not have any religion because what they did have seemed totally unlike the model presented by Christian missionaries.5 Today these citizens might say they are Buddhist or Confucian, atheistic or involved in one the many “new” religions that have developed in Asia in the last 50-100 years.6 I had the opportunity to discuss the Christian prototype problem with a bright young religion scholar bearing a very current example of a globalized personal background—native Taiwanese, PhD from UCLA, seeking work in the USA, and an ordained minister in a fast-growing Buddhist Theravada sect known as Yi Fo Sheng. But he showed surprising little understanding or interest. Of course, he had no alternative terms or models he could use within the standard scholarly language that determines admittance into the academic community, a version of English he had to work harder than most to master. However, further conversation revealed the clue—that he had probably absorbed the whole Christian paradigm
through the sect's 19th century scholar-founder who explicitly strove to "modernize" Buddhism in so many ways that it became a distinct sect, better conforming to Western expectations.  

The globalization of Christianity is beginning to get sustained scholarly attention. An African was not elected pope in Rome this past spring, but the possibility was talked about. More substantively, the Church of England is dealing with a growing number of African and Asian Anglican churches joining the list of those threatening to withdraw from the international communion over the ordination of an openly gay American minister (the Nigeria communion has recently announced its withdrawal). As more Christianities are explored, the prototype may well be challenged in at least two general ways, by us, secular scholars from outside the normal definitions of the fold, but also by ministers from within, who are making decisions about what Christianity will be in the future—or more specifically, what Anglicanism, Methodism, Roman Catholicism, and new independent forms indebted to only their only selective appropriation will be.

In describing the historical rise of Christianity as prototype, one might rightly ask about Judaism and Islam, both notably active in European history during the later centuries establishing Christian dominance. Yet even these early challenges to the development of the Christian prototype were effectively muted as each was given an early and consistent niche in the dominant Christian cosmology: Judaism was quickly demoted to those “refuse-niks” who rejected the truth, misguided brothers due to the share textual base and common roots (which not save failed to save them from the persecution of pogroms, but was served as an historical warrant for them); while Islam, the barbarians at the gate, were the threat that defined the very physical and psychological borders of Christendom. The differences among these three were, in fact, a type of proof to Christians of the distinctive Christ story: the eventual appreciation of the
monotheistic and textual inheritances in which all three participated were taken as further proof that the Christian model could contain and explain religion more widely. That all three participated in rather different monotheistic and textual inheritances took Christians until the twentieth century to work out.

Religion as the Irrational

The Enlightenment is responsible for many congruent cultural shifts, but for my narrow purposes, I will simply describe how it amended the previous idea of the Christian prototype with the emergence of a fully developed concept and terminology for a more generic notion of "religion" in itself, namely, religion as the irrational. Up until the 16th century, as Sam Preus nicely demonstrates, there was only the haziest notion of a general category of religion. And the only judgments as to rationality or irrationality, influenced by the discovery of "The Philosopher," concerned Christianity in particular: Thomas Aquinas argues that certain Christian mysteries, though not all, could not be determined by the use of reason and thus were the result of revelation. The work of a close contemporary, the putative author of The Travels of Marco Polo (1275-92), was written and popularized during the ascendancy of Christianity in Europe, well before the stirrings of the Enlightenment. For Marco, there were only four categories by which to classify and understand all the peoples he met, most of whom existed outside the structure of clear-cut nation states: a person was a Christian, Jew, Moor (Saracen), or a pagan. Polo's travel memoirs constantly refer to the stereotypes associated with each, and seldom was he surprised by any non-stereotypical behavior, except for those pagans, the Chinese, who astonished him with their good manners, deep learning, and clearly observed social order. In fact, Marco is kindest toward all pagans, noting many humanitarian aspects of
their teaching and lives; he is brief on the Jews and unremittingly harsh on the Muslims—due in part, suggests Robert Latham, who introduces the Penguin Classic, to the trade rivalry they presented to the bold new hopes of Europeans.¹³

The Enlightenment’s separation of church and state, on top of Europe’s growing knowledge about and interaction with other religious cultures (e.g., Jesuits writing home with their version of a rationalized Confucianism) aided the standardization of a common term in popular parlance. Even though Christianity structured understanding of the notion of religion after itself, the term recognized, with excitement, that there were totally non-Christian religions out there. Of course, these foreign encounters led to debates in which the positive properties ascribed to the newly discovered religions, such as rational superiority or greater age in history, constantly alternated with evidence of their depravity.¹⁴ The Jesuits are particularly interesting to read for their unrelenting interpretive efforts to find in Confucianism what they felt just had to be there, some ancient evidence of the disclosure of the existence of God the Father and later the Son.¹⁵ Those who seized on such foreign examples to demonstrate the possibility of a rational religion (morality without metaphysics!), most famously Leibniz and Voltaire, were critiquing the Christian churches and working toward the separation of church and state. They and their predecessors were also attempting to maintain a natural option between the scientific realism that was the context of their interest and traditional religious devotion (and powerful churches) that formed an object of criticism: some sort of “religion” was widely regarded as the necessary source of morality, needed to hold the rabble to the norms of social order. The emergence of Deism, a rationalized Christianity so important for the founders of the independent American colonies, is testimony to the difficulty in spanning this divide between rational and institutional piety, given the sheer amount of traditional Christianity that Deism had to jettison. It may be that
Deism was the closest a Euro-American could come to atheism, an idea that was literally hard to think until Darwin’s theory of evolution provided another way of thinking, at the very least, about how it all began.16

As the empirical sciences developed sufficient social capital to turn their gaze on human history and social life, the paradigm of the rational in contrast to the irrational became an ideological tool with many uses. Not least, the objectification of religion in tandem with the expanding delineation of science created the environment for the earliest study of religion as religion. In a practice sense, religion became what science was not. The power of this dual objectification of religion and science eventually meant that as the irrational, religion was a natural object of study for the “sciences of man,” as developed by Hume, Vico and Tyler among others. Indeed, the interplay of the rational and irrational in definitions of the early sciences of religion led to some of the forms of comparative religion still practiced today—one particular line of scholars being comprised of the well-known figures of Max Müller, Sir James Frazer, and Mircea Eliade, among others—began to search for universals within the family of human religions, plural but clearly an ultimately singular entity of a profound sort—the sacred.

The effort to identify universal patterns among the world’s religions had the potential to displace Christianity as the prototypical religion for comparative purposes, substituting as UR religion. This project was continually floated, certainly in Müller, but the UR categories were never convincingly foreign or unexpected. Most of the universalists do not seem to have imagined putting Christianity aside because they thought they already had. Instead of working on insuring that project, they tended to be lured by other visions, such as taxonomy of gods that would prove a particular theory of development, an inventory of all the wisdom of the world, or
even the disclosure of that "sacred" underlying the particular forms of human religious experience.

While not threatening the Christian prototype, the era that developed "irrational religion" did in fact introduce the means for a rudimentary egalitarianism and relativism when viewing the diversity of religions. If one group was alert to the unenlightened primitive still within Christianity, the other looked for the Christian mysteries hidden in the historical experience of the pagans: the quest to grasp the universals of religion was nothing less than the key to a timeless, if vaguely familiar, sacrality expressed in all religious manifestations, making religion of this vein the most fully shared forms of human insight. Scholars today, notably the recently deceased but much quoted Roy Rappaport, will still echo with confidence the idea that uncovering the dynamics of this sacrality would explain the emergence of human-ness itself; although for Frazer and Eliade there were always hints that "the sacred" might be more ontological than phenomenological, while for Rappaport it is clearly an evolutionary development. 17

Within the paradigm of the Christian prototype, the foregoing search for universals behind the irrational wisdom of religion, scholars such as Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89) and his student Ernest Troeltsh (1865-1935), who followed romantic Hegelianism, argued like many before them that Christianity was the fulfillment of history, although Troeltsh later modified his position: only in Western culture was Christianity truly "absolute." 18 Likewise, in the 20th century, beginning to devise a phenomenological approach to religion, Eliade could still suggest early in his career that in Christianity one found the most logical and fulfilling development of the symbolism of the divine expressed in all preceding religions. 19 Christianity as the perfection
of the prototype found new ways to triumph even within the innovative context of religion as the irrational subject of rational scholars.

**World Religions**

The world religions paradigm has been so extraordinarily popular that it is certainly the way most Americans at least have come to see religion and religious multiplicity. Its popularity rests on many factors, primarily promotion by the discipline in order to solve so many problems of emphasis, logic, and cultural-centrism, when multiple religions are introduced. Even today it is still considered indispensable by too teachers in need of pedagogical tools for introducing students to a great deal of material in a manner that minimizes traditional suspicions and prejudices. Setting up a limited array of world religions—usually five through eight – can make the strange less strange; it can also invite effective questions about ideas and structures. the real fruits of comparison in any field.

Yet the paradigm always involves one major problem that readily generates resistance by some of the included traditions, namely, the “leveling” implied in making one’s religion just another in a group of comparable items. While many traditions today, and historically, are comfortable with this approach, some are not. Traditional Catholics, conservative Evangelicals, and conservative Sunni Muslims would certainly hesitate to include this formula in their own school curricula; and some resent it completely – usually because of exclusivistic claims. Yet another more theoretical problem could also be part of their resistance: such formulations make each religion fit a gross simplification of the prototype in very neatly explicit ways just in order to display the fact that religions are so similar in their basics, that no one of them can dominate or act as a prototype. The aura of comparable qualities is, of course, historically and theological
misleading for each religion. Finally, what does a list of eight world religions say about the other religions not included? That they are simply not large enough in the world? That they are confined to national entities and thus do hold the promise of generating a trans-national community? Or, that they do not fit the model/prototype used and so many not even technically qualify as religions after all?

These problems were painfully brought home to me, in an unexpected way, when the theologian and dedicated spokesperson for a “global ethic,” Hans Kung, came to speak at a conference on campus, bringing with him his “World Religions—Universal Peace—Global Ethic” exhibition, a series of large handsome panels. Each panel identified an explicitly world religion, provided a distinctive symbol, posted a recognizable photograph of one of its holy places, and then simply listed a series of basic facts such as the founder (or rough equivalent), the main ideas or creeds, and ritual obligations. The overall effect is to demonstrate a fundamental unity in the natural structure of these religions and, more specifically, a consensus on the message of peace that is Professor Kung’s overriding concern at this point in his career. However, Kung’s panels were drawn into a totally unrelated lecture series sponsored by the “Local Religion, Global Relationships” project of the Religious Studies Dept at Santa Clara, which studies the diversity of religious communities in Silicon Valley. The Project was having its first lecture series in which local religious leaders were invited to campus to speak for themselves about their communities and how they dealt with the pluralism of the valley. The opening reception, held prior to any of the lectures, was in the rotunda displaying Kung’s World Religions panels. I was upset when I first heard about this collision of events, but then decided to make it useful, no matter how difficult: I would ask the local religious leaders (partly using an assistant) just how they felt about representation of their traditions by the panels and the leveling
they imposed. Their surprising answers all tended to be "no problem"; on the contrary, they were
glad to be represented there at all. The fact that Christianity was only one panel among the six
appeared to be a refreshing leveling to them and they found no significant fault with the
information displayed. The "world religions" approach, according to the Native American Indian
shaman who spoke last in the series, could easily be seen as a victory given the ubiquitous
dominance of Christianity if one's religion was included. I know their views were more than
mere politeness since a number of their formal presentations of their traditions could easily have
been lifted from Huston Smith's ubiquitous pocket-size anthology, *The Religions of Man.*

So the popular and over-worked pedagogical view differs from the scholar's eye-rolling
sense of the inadequacy of the world religions approach. The latter group, however, has not done
much to discuss the issue in print. In 1962 Wilfred Cantwell Smith raised the problem of the
inherently poor fit provided by the term "religion" when applied to the pre-modern traditions of
the East, a disrespect heightened by the West's willingness to invent names (and jurisdictions)
for these traditions that do not correspond well at all to how they identify themselves.22 Jonathan
Z. Smith has addressed the history and classification difficulties of the term "world religions."
but the topic had to wait until 2005 for Tomoko Masuzawa's *The Invention of World Religions*
for a full historical analysis of the European effects of the emergence of the paradigm.23

Masuzawa's book will draw attention to this paradigm, forcing more self-consciousness in using
it. Nonetheless, the textbooks on World Religions continue every other month, undoubtedly
further efforts in a long line that have tried to unseat Huston Smith's claim on the public and the
junior college markets. In the wake of the Pluralism Project directed by Diane Eck, some are
now making more use of the Web or CDs.24 some colleagues recently generated an introductory
textbook, entitled *Global Religions,* edited by Mark Juergensmeyer. Unfortunately, the textbook
does not use the theme of globalization to introduce a critique of the world religions approach, which the book follows in a curtailed fashion. Rather it attempts to modify our traditional understanding of these religions as neatly associated with particular geographic locales. The chapters deftly complicate the histories with diasporas and transnational ways of living, some that have been endemic since the earliest days of a community. World religions, global religions: what's in a name, we might ask? It may be possible that this book can begin to crack open some of the tenets of the world religions paradigm; but it seems more probable, given the introduction and the marketing, which the globalization vocabulary will merely update and further secure the world religions paradigm for another generation.25

Cultural Necessity of Religion

After the paradigms I have described as the Christian prototype, religion as irrational, and world religions. the fourth paradigm can seem unexpected, namely, the "cultural necessity of religion." With the emergence of anthropological studies, usually dated to E. B. Tylor (1832-1917), the attempt to determine the origins of religion (either prehistorically or as part of a total scheme for human history) gave way to analysis of religion's continuing role in social life.26 In fact, the coexistence of (irrational) religious beliefs with scientific rationalism became a major question in its own right, one that further cemented the idea of "religion" as uniting all the major belief traditions from the most ancient or primitive known to revealed Christianity and all the other more or less respectable but, from the point of view of many an early European Protestant scholar, still redemption-deprived "faiths." Given the irrational religion paradigm continuing into an even more scientific age, these religions were put on the same page, so to speak, just as it came to be understood that all religion would probably fade under influence of empirical
knowledge. Yet the social sciences asked why people were continuing to believe in great numbers when they no longer needed to do so, thereby opening up many new perspectives.

Although the encounters forged by early anthropologists got started in painfully uneven ways, the results of which we continue to uncover to this day, their comparisons of "primitive" and "civilized" societies facilitated the realization of similarities in the practice of religion that began to answer questions about its continued role. Emile Durkheim hypothesized that religion was intrinsic to the construction of the social group; Franz Boas provided cultural evidence of many forms of shared humanity especially in craft and myth; while Sigmund Freud described the formation of the modern inner self as embodying the childlike primitive, laboring under the onus of civilization. Each of these path breakers found their own rational, post-Enlightenment cultures to be built on fundamental—and socially crucial—irrationalities identifying a level of human experience shared with all manner of other populations. This diminishment of the distinctions that scholars saw among themselves, ancients, natives, and far-off exotics occurred in the age of Charles Darwin's *Origin of the Species* (1859). If a new unity was introduced, it also brought a new disunity between "that old time religion" and the degrading theories of the over-intellectualized classes. Although some were pleased that Darwin's theory vindicated the model of a single creation as suggested by the Bible instead of the racist theories of multiple creations used to support a natural ordering of human beings based on their color, it was a theory that otherwise appeared to divide as surely as the issues of the America Civil War that preceded its dissemination. In Protestant America, Darwin brought science and Christianity to a fork in the road.

As the first truly secular paradigm, the cultural necessity of religion generated a distinctive divide within the social sciences between those with theological sympathies or
affiliations in contrast to those who clearly foreswore any such loyalty to the non-scientific. Protestant anthropologists and sociologists had an easier time making their position clear than divinity school scholars, usually ordained clerics from an earlier stage of life who slowly gravitated to the social sciences; they were constantly accused of allowing the theological to degrade their analyses, although it was just as like the universalistic assumptions still so important to the social sciences in general as lingering theological ones. Yet scholars of religion in divinity schools who founded non-theological programs of studies, i.e., religionswissenschaft or history of religions, one of the major venues for the study of religion today, used the secular paradigm to create gray areas in which the social sciences and both church history and theology influenced each other, creating something that differed from either extreme. This would prove to be one angle among many from which the division between rational minds describing irrational cultures seemed less clear the more it was probed. Still, popular society was in love with the cold scientist, male or female, whom the movies obliged to fall in love with an irrational or maddeningly unconventional kook. Just as often the fatherly old scientist would embody both, rational to the point of being irrational, even savvy, in real life. By this time, life had imitated art as movie goers had become aware of the theories of the scientist of the age. Grandfatherly Einstein, father of atomic energy and critic of the bomb, genius of relativity and quantum mechanics, represented yet another “marriage” of the rational and irrational in the terms of the twentieth century. Of course, the horrific events of the century were killing off many a sacred cow owned by both science and religion.

The model of religion as a universal, indispensable, and non-rational social creation would be used by Religious Studies scholars for decades. Even the world religions paradigm was made to fit into it as well as support it. A category for the “other” primitive religions of
anthropological studies was already tacked on. The leveling equality of the "world religions" model, in addition to the social scientific "evidence" for religion as a significant marker for shared social qualities of humanity across all races and societies, certainly underscored the importance of religion in discussions of the "family of man." But these new humanisms came at some cost. Religion was a new socio-cultural bond among the peoples of the world and an expectation if not on-going necessity for social life only insofar as its irrationality was most pronounced. Indeed, the sciences and emerging social sciences found in religion all the irrationalities that they were intent to overcome. Aquinas's tendency to grant the co-existence of the rational and the irrational, greatly minimized in the struggles of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, was nonetheless reflected in many Enlightenment theorists; however, it given way to the dominance of science and the humanistic belief in its role in freeing human beings from various forms of enslavement (such as described by Durkheim, Freud, Marx, and Spencer). This was the clearest language in which religion succumbs to history. All of these thinkers wondered how society would fare in this new mode, if it could survive at all, and many had inklings of pseudo-religions on the horizon--nationalism, industrialization, individualism, and free market capitalism, for example. The "cultural necessity of religion," which would signify for many the moderating effects of religious values on the moralities of secular humanism, in the end haphazardly reinforced fears of these other irrationalities, while backing off from pronouncements of the demise of the irrational. Certainly the events the twentieth century helped to kill off many sacred cows--secular, religious, rational, and irrational.

Religion as a Western Construct
The last paradigm in the present exercise is the current evocation that religion is a Western construct. The discourse of the postmodern critique, within which this paradigm was generated, emerged during the later half of the 20th century by developing a simple logic long operative within a number of fields. Boas's notion of culture alone contains all the sticky seeds needed to germinate this perplexed and perplexing perspective. For example, if all people are embedded within cultures and inevitably see other cultures through the lens of their own, then it stands to reason that scholars cannot see other cultures without the biases, both conscious and unconscious, which their cultural lens inevitably confer on other people's reality. This insight enabled religion scholars to see and explore aspects of the Christian prototype at work shaping Religious Studies for the first time. For decades they had simply focused on accusations of the influence of Christian theology on their more historical and sociological efforts, and worked to expunge clearly theological tendencies. Yet so many other avenues and dilemmas opened up in the last decades of the twentieth century that exploration of the prototypical role given to Christianity was not pursued with any sustained energy or direction. Rather, the field developed a stream of work particularly preoccupied with deconstructing the idea of religion as universal and sui generis, suppositions behind the comparative world religions paradigm as well as the earlier ones, of course. Yet the religion-as-irrational paradigm, built by a long line of "natural" oppositions, was the first to begin to stumble. While pushed from many directions, feminist critical theory developed strong historical arguments and greater institutional influence. However, Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) introduced another level of analysis, namely, the misreadings (some linking colonization to the conferral of feminine and irrational qualities on the colonized) that made scholarly analysis blissfully unaware of its role in maintaining the cultural biases that.
in turn, kept communities defenseless against the political encroachment of more powerful political entities with their equally powerful, and confident, sense of reality.\textsuperscript{30}

Said’s work stopped some professors in their tracks. More required a shift in the overall \textit{zeitgeist} to understand the argument and its significance. \textit{Orientalism} was soon complemented by a plethora of narrow and broad studies addressing the body, sexuality, notions of the soul, rationality, and the place of women, and even the church, in the rise of science—in other words, scholars of religion began read widely and together with other disciplines explored many of the assumptions that had helped to support the oldest paradigms for so long. Said also, if indirectly, provoked greater sensitivity to the assumptions of traditional academic research, such as the belief that there was no need to hear from those people, the “others” of their research, affected by the assumptions and ultimately the studies. As the past became less familiar territory to more than just historians, and other cultures were no longer so easily accessible to analysis, various critiques of the culture of science made even the bedrock of institutionalized rationality shift a bit.\textsuperscript{31} Some religionists tried to save the idea of religion as a universal by identifying it more fully—subsuming it within culture; but the concept of culture had its own deconstructive critiques to try to survive. This period is, of course, familiar ground to readers, but the way it has been weathered by scholars of religion is still being assessed: indeed, while the concepts that have fallen and hit the ground are fairly easy to notice, it is too soon to come to any conclusion about exactly what is left standing. Yet some disciplinary history is clear.

An early and particularly humorous revelation of bias were the examples of Protestantism displayed in scholarly studies of 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, particularly in regard to textual studies of ancient scriptural traditions whose modern manifestations were disdainfully dismissed as Catholic-like corruptions. Donald Lopez describes the story of the Pali text society’s search
for the earliest, and purest, Buddhism with skill and verve; yet before him, Mary Douglas and
later Jonathan Z Smith were struck by the clearly Protestant (and, therefore, anti-Catholic) bias
they were finding in quite different scholarly materials. Still, as noted above, the main target of
the deconstructive imagination was the field itself, identified with one or two ideas, but never
identified by the full set of paradigms I have done so here. Titles such as The Ideology of
Religious Studies, Manufacturing Religion, and The Western Construction of Religion testify to a
healthy round of critical studies that have made the field much more aware of its complex
historiography. However, the titles of these books bark louder than their arguments actually
bite. The most extreme position, swallowed by many a religion writer with an audible gulp, was
defined early on by Jonathan Z Smith when he wrote “Religion is solely the creation of the
scholar’s study.” While waived as a banner by later critical studies of flavors, Smith’s assertion
has not been clearly analyzed or challenged to date. One wonders, for example, what the
vigorous section of the American population lobbying for religious causes would make of such a
statement. Indeed, Smith’s understanding of “religion” may even underestimate how quickly
such a term, passing out of the scholar’s window, is drawn upon in real encounters of all kinds in
a variety of borderlands: travel writers composing texts of the distant and exotic; missionaries
trying to explain their cultural communication problems to the “boards” back home who want
news of converts; as well as the many dictionary projects that began soon after first attempts by
missionaries and anthropologists alike to engage indigenous communities in talk of their
beliefs. No matter how it was created, the idea of religion came to be was reified in line with
the Christian prototype of a set of beliefs about God and quickly supplied a variety of needs
incurred by the cultural diversity encountered, such as the need speak to them and of them in
terms more complex than simply “the saved” and “the rest.”
Smith also underestimates the extensive influence of the term today. Many Muslims and Buddhists would currently be hard pressed to think of their “religions” without the categories that we might trace back to a Christian prototype and experiences of Euro-American intrusion. Indeed, defining cultural practices as religion (or vice versa) has had the unexpected result in America of protecting them by putting them on an equalizing footing under the law with Christianity and other world religions. Ogallala Sioux or Inuit fishing communities will still talk about their cultural identity in other terms than religion, such as a way of life that has come down to them from their ancestors and not just a set of beliefs; but then many of them were forced to convert to Christianity and the distinction between their religion and their culture is a solution to how to maintain the latter and acknowledge the realities of the former.\(^{37}\)

In this way the postmodern critique of modernism facilitated numerous inquiries into assumptions that formed the Christian prototype for religion in general, adding to more longstanding questions about the comparative aspects of the “world religions” paradigm and providing the context for debates that have destabilized the notion of scientific truth determined the rational and irrational. The latter debates left both sides of the Enlightenment dichotomy of science and religion as historical constructions that do not always, and have not always, fit the circumstances with which scholars understood themselves to be dealing. Yet Said’s demonstration of the construction of bodies of knowledge used by Western powers for agendas that spoke to cultural progress and political domination on the one hand, and spoke for the colonized as their best hope for all the benefits of Western civilization on the other (salvation then, trade now?), inevitably led to a reflexive habit: is Said’s picture of the power of European discourse about the Orient, disorienting as it originally was, just a bit too empowering its description of effective agency? What continuities does this black box have with the others
identified above? Said's study is old enough that a developed critique of it has moved the conversation into more parsed realities that this essay has any business enumerating. Although the ruckus over globalization—for, against, reality, mirage, historically "old hat," etc.—it shows how difficult it will be to avoid meta-narratives in which the interests of a dominant culture are projected as reality, as the future, as the excellent outcome for all who cooperate—or the cause of unprecedented poverty and even environmental degradation.

Even a short stretch of service in the scholarly professions today is sufficient to teach one that today's corrections (one would have written "truth" twenty-five years ago) are tomorrow's examples of short-sightedness. Compare the literature that began about twenty-years ago on the scholar's obligation with regard to cultural products of colonized and conquered peoples that are plundered to end up in museum collections or the black market that encourages more plunder. It was clear that a thoughtful person could not encourage the destructive vandalism of archeological sites by buying a truly old museum-quality pot from the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico. Yet in a recent essay, Kwame Anthony Appiah, reflecting on the "cultural patrimony" of his native Ghana, makes a much more nuanced if unexpected argument for the repatriation when goods are looted from people with known names and clear cultural links, but the validity of why "the British Museum's claim to be repository of the heritage not of Britain but of the world." That view strikes him as "exactly right," although Appiah would be more comfortable with their continued residence there if the treasures of a vanished civilization are indeed shared more widely.\textsuperscript{38} Of course, the deadly details will be those arguments about whether a culture has truly vanished or continued in some form.

It is not clear where the study of religion is going, as so many new books are quick to say, but the choices have always appeared limited. The field might define "religion" in a narrow
manner, reflecting either strict specifics of content or style of practice (belief in a supernatural being, which is quite true for all systems of religious-like practice) or historical criteria suiting its emergence in the Christian dominated world of late medieval Europe (related to being bound by vows in thirteenth century sources). Or it may suppose a universality that could never be proven, but posit an open “family of resemblances” with which to describe the commonalities. The field may abandon the term as an historical artifact and place analytic weight on “culture” or “tradition,” hoping they can do the job. As a fourth alternative, it might agree that the European roots of the notion of religion have been transcended by cultural contacts that have spread the concept and encouraged a rapidly varying set of nuances in how, why and when it is used. One reveals one’s hand in making any such list, so I acknowledge that this conclusion project is part of a current project, although it suggests a project tracing some major main lines of transmission, translation and usage that are beyond my plans despite how exciting I find the idea.

There is, however, yet another option and it is a real one facing the field, even if it is currently hard to make sense of. Generated by a diverse set of voices, almost all emanating from the sciences, sociology to neurology, there is fresh mobilization to cast “religion” as a universal, adaptive, cognitive property in the evolution of the history of the human race. With a seductive confidence in the certainty of their claims and frequently embarrassing naiveté as to what has been said in a century of social scientific work, this broad line of theorizing has enough new science at its disposal to be more than a curious diversion, but much less than developed, paradigmatic view. Aside from a small group of rational choice theorists, represented by Rodney Stark, the posthumous influence of the anthropologist Roy Rappaport’s enormous study of ritual, and a few books by Ilkka Pyssäinen, who is said to have been trained in theology and comparative religion, there is a group of cognitive theorists who see themselves as indebted to
Pascal Boyer, and another group who see themselves as more broadly revising the social sciences, represented well if not solely by Stephen Turner.39

The rational choice and Boyer cognitive theorists are apt to claim "finally" to put the study of religion on a scientific footing, with each heralding a new naturalism or taking credit for a "new science" of religion (there have been so many!). These scholars intend to address religion in a more disciplined manner (than whom?) using the newer (really newer?) tools of economic or cognitive precision. Yet so far the confidence of both rational choice and cognitive theory has rested in great part on a total reluctance to address any definitions beyond the most self-evident—and self-serving—ones. The referents for religion, capital, and piety, for example, are all clear-cut and unexamined—as is the method's location in any ideological paradigm. They distinguish themselves with small modifications of their definition of religion as belief in supernatural beings, Superhuman Agency, or Counter-Intuitiveness. The works of Daniel Dennett, David Wilson Sloan and Stephen Turner appear to engage in little of the ideological shadow boxing with traditional scholars of religion that mars the scholars who follow in the footsteps of Boyer.40 With exceptions here and there, the more enthusiastic scientists tend to ignore previous classics in the study of religion, ready to start out fresh with what they do—evolutionary biology or neurology, cognitive psychology, and so on. The popularity of these theorists at conferences at least signals interest in more constructive ways of thinking that are not excessively self-reflexive and bring, perhaps, the certainty of "that old time science."

In general, as this fresh mobilization of science wrests the study of religion from its traditional handlers, most of those handlers have moved on themselves, notably with work on social memory as developed by Paul Connerton and Danielle Hervieu-Leger, as well as the social ramifications of agency or cognitive programming on religious experience as seen in
studies by Ann Taves and Robert N. McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson. Using practice and performance theory, others have focused less on the mental states long thought to define religion and more on the creative activities. All of these groups have opened up just some of the most identifiable fronts in the study of religion. It is an open question to what extent they will avoid some of the knots that have defined that study for so long. Avowed atheism or scientific precision is certainly not going to do it. In too many of these theorists, there is a palpable eagerness to overcome the pesky challenges of postmodernist paradigm's view of the Western construction of religion. To the extent that it is not taken seriously, the new fronts in religion may turn out to be very familiar: certainly the popularity at conferences of those cognitive theorists who are each inventing a new science of religion signals interest in ways of thinking that are not excessively self-reflexive and bring, perhaps, the certainty of "that old time science."

Tilting at Paradigms

In one form or another, the five paradigms described above are constants in the discipline of History as well as Religious Studies. They demonstrate the staying power of major models over centuries, the type of enduring resiliency that has created fields of study, absorbed repeated challenges, and stubbornly resisted abandonment. Feuerbach, that 19th century theologian-turned-Hegelian-turned philosophical anthropologist of religion, put it with a simplicity that Marx would echo: "man does not dominate his fundamental conception of the world; on the contrary, it is it that dominates him, animates him, determines, and governs him." We do not have ideas about the world so much as they have us. But Feuerbach's nineteenth century pessimism eventually gave way to twentieth century confidence that if we cannot change things we can
imagine them in our own image, as far from static. Fundamental conceptions may absorb repeated challenges, but they morph more regularly to avoid such challenges.

So how does one deal with the paradigms I have isolated? The process of going from a paradigm important to the discipline to a problematic way of thinking that should be left behind (no parallel to the career span of a professor intended!) is not encouraged by Feuerbach or even Kuhn. Kuhn’s analysis of the replacement of scientific paradigms may not be completely descriptive of the more diverse methods and interests of the humanities and social sciences, but I do not think it seriously misleads. In brief, he argued that an old paradigm is not an old paradigm until there is a new one to replace it, one that already has substantial support. People do not throw out a way of thinking to leave themselves dependent on one person’s method; they certainly will do nothing to make their own previous work suddenly retrograde. A challenge to an aging paradigm will be viewed as something more promising than tilting at windmills only if it entails a clearly developed alternative way of thinking already constructively productive for more than a few. And that would only be the beginning: whoever started the paradigm toppling would probably not recognize, or enjoy, the working result.

It might be interesting to illustrate the difficulties of challenging a paradigm with a personal example. My projects on ritual, textuality and, most recently, belief, are not a set of integrated arguments, but they are analogous examples of engagements with reigning assumptions and they present some amusing lessons.

My work on ritual is my most complete challenge since it even included an attempt at a constructive alternative. I tried to dismantle the 19th century construction of ritual as a universal phenomenon, considered utterly distinct in its structural mode of action and, inevitably, dependent on all of our unexamined assumptions about thought and action. I wrote two books on
the topic before I realized that there was a deeper, core paradigm shaping the notion of ritual that made my study into a set of wooden arrows bouncing harmlessly off a steel tank, namely, the idea of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the endlessly mystifying act of violence at the heart of religion (especially with Christianity as the model) and, in theory, the fount of all other modes of ritual action, such as initiation, offerings, prayers, and sacred dramas. Not realizing that sacrifice was the thread to pull, I simply addressed it in passing to avoid giving it the traditional degree of attention. Intent on challenging the basic assumption of the uniqueness of ritual, I took the contrary view—analyzing at ritual activities as fully within the context of all other forms of social action. If ritual is not a uniquely different way of acting, that is, lacking a particular universal structure, then the questions shift to what is the difference between ritual and other ways of acting and, very key to my mind, when and why would people decide to do ritual acts instead of something else. I depicted ritual as one type of social praxis, namely, “practices of ritualization” and even used a "control," so to speak, by comparing a ritual way of acting to “theorizing” as yet another type of social action. In the end, this all meant that I defined general characteristic principles of practice, and then explored how ritual distinctly played with these principles (as did theorizing). I emerged with examples of how people effectively ritualize a set of otherwise normal actions and explain why that can be a strategic way of acting in particular types of some situations. In addition, I tried to account for the mythic view of “unchanging” tradition (which is the preferred focus or context for most ritualizing) as well as all the many ad hoc ritual activities—religious, civic, and familial—that people consciously and unconsciously deploy in their lives.

Needless to say, I was not successful in single-handedly providing a new understanding of sacrifice. The attraction of the concept may be hard to convey, but it crops up in some widely
popular form almost every decade. My career alone has seen three sacrifice fads. There recently was René Girard's psycho-theological theory of the murdered scapegoat, and a decade and a half before him, Georges Bataille's notion that the profane, when taken to transgressive extremes such as sacrificial killing (or self-mutilation), mystically transforms itself into an experience of the sacred. On the basis of those ideas alone, I should have gone back to take on sacrifice explicitly. The concept is certainly relevant in public religious and political life, for example, the ritualization of terrorism in orchestrated acts by which Palestinian "sons" are sacrificed, instead of the ram, in acts of terrorism against Jews. The ritual can be seen as an attempt to sacralize the political struggle for "the land" in a manner that undermines the sacralization claimed by Jewish settlers and, indeed, the government of Israel.

Meanwhile, in a third style, studies of sacrifice as the classic example of unique ritual action continue to be written. Invited to join a prestigious anthology of terms, the editors gave me the topic of "performance," included "sacrifice," leaving ritual out altogether. The recent vogue is exemplified by the late anthropologist, Roy Rappaport, in a lengthy posthumous volume that describes ritual as "the social act basic to humanity," the act that at the dawn of human history, and even today, that socializes the merely human into true humanity. This formulation has begun to appear in many popular forms. Surprisingly, Robert Bellah has given an exceptional show of support for Rappaport's nearly mystical and ultimately apocalyptic paean to the power of ritual. His defense of Rappaport is eventually followed by a critique of my analysis of "ritualizing" as fundamentally nihilistic, as if I were denying the existence of real acts of ritual simply by challenging the idea of a uniquely-structured entity behind the name. Ritual (sacrifice), as the cornerstone of human evolutionary adaptation, will be around awhile as a trendier version of the previous ideas.
Overall, therefore, I am not impressed with any ground gained in my first extended bout with a paradigm. I have learned to take the romanticism of ideas for scholars much more seriously; my understanding of theorizing is leading, I hope, to a fuller analysis. However, I also tried to explore the shape of paradigm in a project on the nature of textuality in China. I saw textuality as invoking distinct cosmological structures, although the focus on Chinese texts was due to my own love of their aesthetic materiality, as well as the conviction, now commonplace, that the particular form of written language would generate a different text-supporting cosmos than that of the European Bible. In the historical saga of the latter, one of the main themes is the story of how the writing conquers orality, the priests defeat the prophets, the messiah dies to live on in the Reformation Biblical text. In Chinese history, an early divinatory cosmos and spoken words of the masters become bound in commentary until new sources of texts were found in new layers of the cosmos, an imaginative development that followed the introduction of Buddhism. Printing affected both Europe and China quite differently at first, but more similarly over time. What is the significance in all this, I wondered, for the medium, the message, the power structure, and competition of cosmological visions? I could go on to link these issues to the introduction of the Bible in China and the profound effect of the first Western books in a culture in which community groups would collect stray bits of scrap paper, especially with writing on them, and bring them baskets to burn at the temple for “merit,” a notion that appeared in the cosmos of China’s earliest scribes. An account of the religious text in China would show up the influence of a paradigm about the Biblical cosmos and its effect on the nature and authority of texts even into the modern era—that is, through the Reformation, which made the text everything and in the process gave birth to the sciences of textual analysis. Protestantism and our cultural paradigm involve the tension between the sacred and the analyzed text. There is a master narrative in
which the history of writing and printing in Europe is basically taken to describe how it happens
elsewhere. This narrative led Benedict Anderson to remark: “I was startled to discover, in many
notices of Imagined Communities, that this Eurocentric provincialism remained quite
undisturbed.”

I am currently exploring another set of paradigms within the concept of belief, in part as
an effort to keep my scholarship in tune with how most religious people today see themselves
and define their practices. However, other colleagues probing the field have focused on the
discourse surrounding the “cultural necessity of religion” paradigm and noted the stubborn
tendency of religion scholars to treat religion as always a good thing. Of course, religion scholars
are not fools; we know that religion is not always doing good, but assumptions about its
fundamental moral nature is certainly another black box that convolutes our thinking. Over the
years there has been talk about self-imposed constraints or censoring due to the institutions
sponsoring our scholarship or even our own earliest loyalties. Striking a very basic note.
Jonathan Z. Smith argued, in connection with his study of Jonestown, that we should study
religions we did not like; others echoed and pushed this unaccustomed perspective. Recently,
however, Robert Orsi offered a very simple critical formulation, saying that scholars of religion
are wedded to the idea that religion is good. Whenever it is not acting well, we explain it away
until the incident is no longer religion but something else—political extremism, a personality cult,
degenerate or demented discontents, and so on. Orsi analyzes this tendency in an argument about
the moral responsibilities of a researcher, and proposes a new formulation for the stance of the
participant-observer studying religion acting badly. His point may be the beginning of a fuller
challenge to a paradigm that may be even more basic than the one with which I began.
Christianity as the prototype.
Historians surely have other paradigms particular to their perspective, which bring their own tricks of vision while generating the scholarship we study and teach—such as the box behind the truism that not knowing history dooms one to repeat it. One historian tells me that this adage it is wrong, wrong, wrong; situations are never really alike—Iraq is not Vietnam. Yet it all depends on the point to be made, the frame that is imposed, the context created by the discourse underway. Taking the long view, paradigms are born and surely some fade away in time. It seems proper that our disciplinary resources get past second-guessing the latest intellectual fad and, using all tools, work to keep the larger picture in view. This is best done now as it has always been, with the thick description of cross-cultural studies and the cross-disciplinary interaction of scholars.
ENDNOTES


6 Thanks to Jim Ketelaar for bringing to my attention the Japanese term *shinkyo*, devised in the nineteenth century to designate religion in general.

7 While maintaining the anonymity of my young colleague, he was a member of Yi Fo Sheng and the Chi Jui Foundation, trained as a minister in the Sangha Council of Southern California.


9J. Samuel Preus, Explaining Religion: Criticism and Theory from Bodin to Freud (New York: Yale University Press. 1987), especially his discussion of Jean Bodin's Colloquium Heptaplomeres de rerum sublimium arcanis abditis (Colloquium of the Seven Secrets of the Sublime, 1593), 3-20, notably 19.


11For arguments about whether Polo ever really reached China, see Frances Woods. Did Marco Polo Ever Go to China? (Boulder, Co.: Westview, 1996). Whether he went or not, the numerous reprinted and possibly expanded editions, over the course of the next few centuries made his four stereotypes applicable, however clumsily, to the wider exotic world.

12Polo quotes Kubilai, the Great Khan, as saying: "There are four great Prophets who are worshipped and to whom all the world does reverence. The Christians say that their God was Jesus Christ, the Saracens Mahomet; the Jews Moses, and the idolaters Sakyamuni Burkhan who was the first to be represented as God in the form of an idol. And I do honour and reverence to all four, so that I may be sure of doing it to him who is greatest in heaven and truest; and to him I pray for aid." For this quote, and the wonderful discussion of the excellent manners of the Chinese "pagans" that Polo met, see Marco Polo: The Travels, trans. Ronald Latham (New York: Penguin, 1958). 119, 160-61.

13Latham, 20-21: for one example, among many, of the cruel Saracens and the valiant Christians, see p. 305.
Preus, 17, demonstrates a growing European understanding of the inevitable relativism brought about by the diversity they were encountering, and the various ways in the earliest thinkers responded to the interpretive challenge.


The exhibit is sponsored by the Global Ethic Foundation in Tübingen. A descriptive brochure was published in 2000, trans. John Bowden, but the Foundation is the result of a programmatic book entitled *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, published by Hans Kung (New York: Crossroads Press, 1991). There are actually 12 panels but only six were shipped for this occasion.


25 Mark C. Juergensmeyer, *Global Religions: An Introduction* (Oxford 2003) states that the text is only “part of a larger project in which some sixty scholars have written on the diversity of religious traditions,” entitled, *A Handbook of Global Religions* (13). The final chapter of the volume is startling, although perhaps too much should not be read into it. It is a posthumous essay in which Ninian Smart addresses the possibility of a future global religion. It is a concern and style of presentation (with its particular rendition of the Christian prototype) that hearkens back to an older generation within the field. If these concerns are not shared by the editor, his sense of filiality may not have served the volume very well. Juergensmeyer also contributes to bit of rewriting of the history of the field when he credits Ninian Smart with being one of the “founders of the modern field of religious studies” (12). It is, first of all, a meaningless statement due to the lack of any context and content.
Preus's strongly held thesis that (irrational) religion has effectively hidden a tradition of rational inquiry, threatening its existence, detracts from a very insightful and sensitive readings of the authors he discusses.

Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* presents a fine, extended argument concerning the interaction of the religion with the racial ramifications of these two pre-Darwinian scientific theories.

This was arguably the first period in Euro-American history when atheism could be a rational position. Darwin's theory provided a biological explanation of life that could displace or rival that of the Book of Genesis. lack of which had always kept many a scientific rationalist a quasi-biblicalist with regard to the origin of life and the universe.

The most consistent example of this critique is Donald Weibe, as in his *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflicts with Theology in the Academy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).


Fitzgerald; Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Daniel


35For examples of the use of the term during Columbus’s encounters in the New World, see Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Howard (Harper and Row, 1984); in the arguments of Bartolome de la Casas (do the natives have a religion to be respected or none so they are ready for conversion), see *Witness: Writings of Bartolome de Las Casas*, ed. George Sanderlin (Orbis, [1971]. 1992).

36*The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* identifies “religion” with 13th century uses in regard to holy orders or persons, like monks, who had “bound” (a probable root word) themselves to a set of rules (s.v. “religion,” vol. 2: 410).


42 Cited in DuBuisson, 198.


One example of a thorough attempt to see how religion works to justify violence, see Mark Juergensmeyer’s *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).


Since I do not know my audience, it might be tactful to preface this talk with a friendly warning about the sort of thing you are going to get. Recently an eminent sociologist of religion used the conclusion of a short survey of new theories on society and culture to single me out for a position of which he wanted no part, namely, a trendy skepticism that bordered on complete nominalism (actually, I think he meant nihilism given the critique). Of course, to me, his was a fairly thorough misreading of my argument, but we all know “every reading is a misreading.”1 I am guilty of misreadings too, but not nominalism, skepticism but not nearly young enough to be trendy. My argument here is an historical one about cultural definitions. I want to unwrap, as accurately as I can, how the idea of religion -- that this is religion but that is something else, magic or civic duty -- was constructed in Western culture, a construction that few would deny was, in many ways, constitutive of Western culture. It is an argument that has some application to current realities.

The prominent part that religion is playing in the news—from stories about global threats of terrorism to the local politics of state school board decisions (Intelligent Design vs Evolution)—is such that one can conclude that religions are cultures, even quite distant cultures despite the radical proximity – or impingement – that is so casual in this era. Samuel Huntington’s has been much-critiqued for his suggestion of a coming “clash” of religious civilizations. Well, he may probably prove incorrect in the long term; but in the short term we
are certainly caught up in smaller clashes now almost everywhere there are religious subcultures, even within populations that have many other ties uniting them.

According to the history we teach, with the 18th century Enlightenment religion became formally distinct from the state, and that distinction curtailed its control over society. This curtailment allowed social developments that had been previously seen, at times, as anti-Christian, such as early scientific pursuits and civic citizenship for those of other religions or sectarian groups — ultimately what we know as secular society itself. But today it is said that we are seeing “fundamentalist” movements rising to reject these secular arrangements, to challenge the containment of religion and refuse modernity as Europe and America have developed it. And should these fundamentalisms have their way, creating an evangelical Christian America or a subdivided Iraq, clashing with its neighbors, then how long before there would be global size clashes? Religion might even succeed in accomplishing the horror that the cold war avoided.

When I start ruminating along these lines I run smack into an old “confusion” — like a messy room that one tries to avoid seeing. It is a basic confusion about the very meaning “religion” has come to have in the world, and I fear there can be no neat map for understanding it. As a “seasoned” professor of the subject, you might not expect me to have a profound perplexity about the very subject of my expertise, but who better? I don’t particularly want to hand you my confusions (in fact, I would rather like to think yours are further along than mine), but I do want to make sure you understand how the global situation you and I have to deal with relies to a great degree on the meanings we give religion.

I do not think that there is going to be a great global clash of civilizations, but I do think there will be constant clashes among any number of subcultures, spurred by religious idealism or conservativism at least as much as the protection of economic or national interests. They will happen again with school boards here in the States, they will build up in a demographically
changing Europe, and they will define much of life in the Middle East and Africa. The stakes in these clashes will involve resources like oil, water, farmland, or sheer political leverage; but many the arguments and some of the long-term goals will hinge on people’s understanding of their religions.

So, in a nutshell, the point of my talk today is to try to provide a description of the historical-conceptual background that Euro-Americans carry in regard to religion. My description is an argument for what the term religion has come to mean for us and how that has happened. The argument also suggests that these Euro-American meanings might differ from or influence others. I have to believe, when my confusion threatens to get out of hand, that the more self-understanding we bring to any cultural clash, the more we will engage the people and the issues, not the rhetoric that packages things. So, you see, academics are always caught in a dialectic of idealism and skepticism.

I. Paradigms

There are, I believe, a handful of paradigms or sets of assumptions that one can demonstrate the history and structure of our understanding of religion. I use the term paradigm in its most neutral sense. While often blamed for constraining thought, paradigms clearly function as our most basic tool for advancing knowledge as a social enterprise. Paradigms are those overly convenient and under-theorized sets of terms that create the scaffolding for a whole litany of interconnected ideas. Eventually, however, we notice this very opportune assistance and become suspicious that reality could so neatly fit our needs: we suspect that the inner scaffolding may have its own history of construction and even ideological uses. From this perspective, to call something a paradigm is to recognize it as a type of “black box” operating in our discourse: and we are obliged catch hold of such boxes and inquire “what are you and why are you here?”
RADICAL INTERPRETATION IN RELIGION
By Nancy Frankenberry

C Bell

""The Chinese Believe in Spirits": Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion"
Chinese Believe In Spirits  Summary

Spate of recent books
Field's lack of involvement
Rodney Needham
Commonplace: belief is sooo Christianity-centered; comparison is distortion
Belief=culture, problems left
Philosophical uses: more individual oriented than anthro
   Needham: Hume to Harnack
   Davidson's radical interpretation: interconnectedness of beliefs and meaning
   Their relationship to interpretation, need to infer them
   Granting others reason/truth simply to decide about truth about them

Level of sentence
Threat to multiple truths

Universal and particular
Davidson tries to hold on to both:
   truth dependent on language/culture vs shared rationalism that enables us to interpret the
   meaning of statements
Same project in philosophical ethics
Richard Schweder: relativism vs universalism => all the diff positions
   In order to elucidate a post-modernist anthropology
   Answer: transcendence w/o superiority
HR=tension betw universalism and particularism
   Scholarship as a vehicle for identifying particularism and forging abstract
   Universalism

Belief: recent def of rel as an over-reaching folk category that misreads & does violence
to other cultures: corrective yes, leaves problems
First, we have by now created "religion" in general and it is out and about
Second, even cultures like China can find examples of belief
   "Our language about belief and meaning is part of an understanding of religion that keeps
   reasserting itself because a tense relationship universalism and particularism may be integral to
   all theoretical projects as we culturally construct them" 105 (tho some projects do try to undo our
   cultural assumptions about knowledge)

= our characterization of the specific illusions of others; shorthand for that which is most culture-
   bound, determined, particular. Three assumptions:
1) cultural beliefs explained (not be ref to a universal!) by reconstructing the system in which
   they "mean": do not exist in our views, so no other route for meaning; thus a coherent system of
   beliefs creates the meaningful structure, religion (106) Circularly of all this makes it work for us
2) deeply held mental orientation or conviction: all or nothing
   Both assumptions basic to Schweder's treatment of the "witch" questions, = central anthro
   question and faultline. no more anthro if every answered. Reconstructing the system of ideas in
   which his statement makes sense means what in the end? That he is a witch, right?
3) we grant belief a priority to action (discussed elsewhere)

Coherence – recent quality for the meaningfulness of a system (Berger), also what religion should provide,
that is, meaningful coherence (but students have not found it; nor clergy:
   Beliefs as specific sets of actions, as social practice versus a T/F linguistic statement or
mental conviction

Looking at how people are religious: very little coherence, instead
“Bundles of behaviors” or “habits of action” by which most situations are dealt with
Meaningfulness more a matter of family, jobs, or service projects; religion used merely to
buttress them; of course, just a particular expectation of religion
Articulating the similarities and differences among how groups expect religion to provide
meaning – how is this possible? Davidson’s “principle of charity” behind interpretation

Chinese Believe in Spirits
Like Long Island residents, much variation in types and degrees of beliefs
Historical examples
Individual aware of variation & have a sense of choice & no coherence
Chinese society is quite diverse, history of cultural traffic
Contrasts w Rosaldo’s isolated Ilongot (really, no debate over heads?)

Religion
People constantly asking themselves what to believe, how much, with what degree of investment.
questions that we ask about religion, but everyone asks them about stocks, politicians, school
boards, etc. Still, these questions concern cultural boundaries of religion, always in flux.
Examples: Wolf’s crazy non-shaman; Falungong on rel or exercise
In fact, a coherently organized system of beliefs is a very deliberate creation, a product prepared
for a purpose. Shanshu stress coherence in their project to present a universal system
Test of hypothesis: A Wolf’s ethnography of grades of spirit currency as corresponding
to a culturally deep understanding mirroring the social landscape...but suggestive at best.
Little coherence among beliefs hold, accdg to few studies. [Even though we tend to
believe about believers that what they want most is a sense of systematic coherence in the cosmos
Of course, my own research, finds beliefs not prior to religious action, but sort of parallel
or resulting from.
Religion implies a false coherence or systematization: “We cannot appeal to belief to describe
how people exist within their cultures; yet without belief, it is not clear what we mean by
religion.”
“Bundle of behaviors” known as feng-shui? Traveled to American culture very easily, w which
its congruence is minimal at best. Cp martial arts, taiqi, zen
Appreciation historicity of our categories: If notion of religion seems to fall apart in one
place, it resurfaces in another: Christian evangelicals

Conclusion: coherence or incoherence can be explored on a more realistic footing if scholarship can let go
of the transcendence status still clutched by Schweder or the logically prior theory of interpretation sought
by Davidson. But we will have to spend more time figuring out how to situate ourselves.

[A discipline, like philosophy or religious studies, exists primarily to save us the work of figuring out
where and how we can situate ourselves. It lets us take it for granted that we have a vista, a place to stand,
and a small soap box from which to expound in ways that do not seem ridiculous, at least to those
sharing most of the same cultural categories.]
"The Chinese Believe In Spirits": Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion

Catherine Bell
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A recent round of books, both popular and scholarly, reveal that as a society we are, once again, fascinated with the issue of belief. While the more popular books tend to adopt a fairly straightforward and uncomplicated notion of believing and then find major problems of rationality, the more scholarly books readily accept a type of rationality to beliefs while problematizing the act of believing in other, more involuted ways.

Both types of argument remind the scholar of religion that the academic discipline of religious studies has not contributed much to this discussion for quite awhile. As described in Rodney Needham's 1972 work, Belief, Language and Experience, which was both a fulsome anthropological treatment of the problems and a cautionary tale for further studies, the concept of belief poses particular problems for comparative analysis since belief does not appear to be identifiable or similarly important in religions we want to compare and from which we want to abstract more general descriptions. Moreover, it is a commonplace that many of our assumptions about the centrality of belief in religion have emerged in a decidedly Christian context, making comparison a distortion of other religious views.

Anthropological studies since Needham have tended to collapse belief into 'culture', which has worked well enough most the time, but it not only avoids the explicit problem of why and how 'beliefs' and 'believing' become prominent in the way in which many people participate in a culture, it also retreats from the problem of various ways in which any one person may appropriate parts of the culture. Recourse to the concept of culture not only leaves many of these questions to popular writers, it also tends to push anthropology into an extreme cultural relativism that is painfully dependent upon the fragile and often unarticulated nature of this idea of culture. Scholars of religion, on the other hand, generally want to use the language of belief to say that members of such- and-such a religion generally hold such-and-such conceptions that motivate their activities. While people have pointed to the overriding need for such an abstract language despite ongoing revelations of its weaknesses, we also know that a term like belief keeps tying the meta-language to assumptions that are more culturally constrained than we really care to defend.

Another reason for the field's hesitation about belief may also lie in philosophical uses of the term. Philosophical usage tends to emphasize a more individualistic version of anthropology's 'culture,' and in so doing deals, at least in passing, with the possibility of idiosyncrasy, madness, or the intent to delude. Philosophers seeking a language with which to analyze how human beings go about interpreting their world, particularly the linguistic communications within it, often make use of the concept of belief to link it to, or play it off, a notion of truth. Needham discussed the links and distinctions drawn between belief and truth in the philosophical tradition stretching from Hume to Wittgenstein, Hampshire, and Harnack. More recently, Donald Davidson has made liberal use of belief in his theory of "radical interpretation." He argues that we cannot make sense of a person's utterances without understanding something of their intentions and beliefs, but "we cannot infer the belief without knowing the meaning, and have no chance of inferring the meaning without the belief." His theory of radical interpretation, therefore, assumes the interconnectedness of belief and meaning as well as their formal role in interpretation. For the sake of his larger argument, essentially a theory about a theory, Davidson focuses on the belief (or 'preference), integral to interpretation, that the statements made by another are or can be true. In fact, he points out, we must grant other speakers, however aberrant or idiosyncratic, a great deal of reason and truth, or else we would
have no way to conclude they are being unreasonable or untrue. Davidson goes on to propose a theory of how we infer belief and meaning, arguing that the inferences that statements can be held to be true cannot be separate from this basic theory of interpretation. However, philosophical discussions like Davidson's, which relate belief and meaning to truth, however truth is understood, not only seem to threaten religious studies' post-theological emphasis on the validity of different worldviews, they also appear to threaten to push analysis to the level of the sentence, from where is appears hard to come to any conclusions about religion in general.

Despite these fears, the question of how to use the concept of belief and how to identify the types of phenomenon potentially illuminated by such a concept remain an inescapable aspect of studying religion within the language traditions that the field of religious studies inherits. This essay, which is for me both an initial and perhaps belated foray into the topic, will explore some unarticulated tendencies in the our use of the notion of belief, and tie our use of this concept to a particular way of thinking about religion. In the end, I will sketch a possible way to approach these issues from a rather different direction.

**Universal and Particular**

A particularly provocative dimension of Davidson's analysis of interpretation is the attempt to hold on to two positions that are usually polarized in such a way as to force a choice of one over the other. On the one hand, he invokes truth (or reality) as clearly dependent on language (or culture), a stance that supports many current understandings of cultural pluralism and relativism, which are compelling and popular positions these days. On the other hand, Davidson also points to a type of shared rationalism that enables us to recognize and interpret the meaning of statements made by others even when the linguistic or cultural overlap is very thin. By holding on to both positions, Davidson attempts to find something of a middle way or, rather, as he puts it, to place theories of interpretation on a new footing. I have read Davidson primarily for this struggle to hold on to both positions in ways that make sense of what we are looking in the study of religion: sometimes it feels like we are encountering very different realities that lead us to question our own; at other times, we experience, and point to, a great deal of similarity, although we can get nervous about that too. In both cases, we wonder what is inevitably particular and what, if anything, is, has been, or is becoming universal.

When reduced to this formulation, however, Davidson's project is one that is widely shared at the moment. Philosophical ethics, in particular, may be doing the most explicit work on how to think about cultural relativism without endorsing complete relativism, but there are and have been other engagements. Among anthropologists, few have tried to imagine a more explicit convergence of relativism and universalism than Richard Shweder. In several studies in the 1980s, he groped to identify all the presuppositions of these polarized positions by delineating and classifying a wide variety of formulations of each. By making transparent what he saw as the main tensions in the field, Shweder hoped to elucidate the basic stance and components of a post-positivist, postmodern anthropology. I do not think his conclusion - that anthropological theorists should adopt a "transcendence without superiority" from which they should "take literally" (as a matter of belief) those reality-aposits so alien in order to discover other realities within the self - is either satisfying or successful. Yet the effort was fascinating, instructive, and bold.

Religious studies, especially the history of religions, has also addressed the issue of universalism and particularism and, like most academic fields, it has probably been formed by the tension between them. The differentiation of the study of religion from theology more than fifty years ago was one early engagement of the issue, by which an emerging "history of religions" approach felt its way to what was arguably a type of universalized theology and a fresh, if incomplete, particularization of Christianity and its siblings. When the field began to focus more on methods of comparison, it took another angle on these polarized options, asking several related questions: if all religions are comparable manifestations of some type of
universal, such as *homo religiosus* or the sacred, should we be comparing to illuminate the universal or the particular or, somehow, both? And what can be adequately compared to what for what end? With the more recent emergence of linguistic and cognitive theories, as well as studies effectively deconstructing universal narratives, one wonders if there is any other issue so responsible for what we do and how we do it today. In no small way, scholarship understands itself as both a vehicle for identifying particularism (we sometimes regarded ourselves as 'liberating' it) and forging formulations of an underlying or abstract universalism. The emphasis may shift back and forth, but each, as Davidson might suggest, is impossible to infer without the other.

**Belief**

According to recent critiques, 'religion' is an over-reaching folk category that misreads and even does violence to other cultures. This is, of course, a corrective, and undoubtedly a slightly exaggerated one, which has the merit of addressing the many liberties we have taken with the term for so long. Yet these critiques leave two concerns unanswered.

**First,** several centuries of talking about 'religion in general' has created a sense of religion in many places that might, arguably, have categorized things differently without such influence. It is not so easy to recontain the term 'religion' at this point in history. It may be just another form of hegemonic imperialism to claim, for example, that the Chinese today are wrong or deluded in using the word 'religion' to describe either past or current practices in their culture. If we are to be clear about the historicity of such terminology, we must follow through and track how the concept is being used today beyond our own theorizing. We know there are no platonic theoretical categories, but we keep thinking we can freeze them for this study or that critique.

**Second,** work in the materials of a culture that has long constituted a good example of classifications that do not fit the Euro-American understanding of religion, namely China. Yet if one looks beyond the careful slices of Chinese culture that are usually chosen as representative, one can find much that is not completely alien to any definition of 'religion,' medieval, enlightenment, or postmodern. It can be refreshing, of course, to drop the notion of religion out of the picture as completely as possible, and either explore the variety of Chinese categories that have been used or fish for other ways of identifying what is either comparable or distinguishable among practices.

These concerns notwithstanding, the attempt to demote 'religion' from a universal (the "consensus of nations"), a biological facility, or a cognitive structure to a theory of the specific classificatory organization of a particular culture helps to illuminate some of the problems attending our language of belief and meaning. In the same way, I want to suggest, our language about belief and meaning is part of an understanding of religion that keeps reasserting itself because a tense relationship between universalism and particularism — whether or not it is the type of solution sought by Davidson and Shweder, among others, may be integral to theoretical projects as we have culturally cast them. Even if we pay full attention to the historicity of the social system examined as well as the historicity of the project of examining it, it is not clear that we secure a footing for scholarship that drops the allure of transcendence as another version of the particularism-universalism polarity.15

While we have tended to use 'religion' to denote a dimension of open-ended commonality, something found in most if not all human cultures, we have used the term 'belief' in the highly tailored, supporting role of denoting the culturally particular foci of a religion — specifically those things that we hold to not exist in fact. If a group 'believes' in less particular or empirically problematic things like love or the tragic dimensions of life, we tend to refer to these not as beliefs, but as cultural values, attitudes, or dispositions. If a group hold convictions about astrological destiny, we are very willing to describe such attitudes as beliefs, not as culture.

Belief is our characterization of the specific illusions of others. But the distinction between belief
and culture is not dramatically demarcated: belief is also our shorthand for the epitome of what we see as being enculturated, culture-bound, or culturally determined.

We explain a culturally particular belief, and that is a very redundant phrase, by its place in a structured system of ideas that we assemble. In this way we see what the belief 'means.' Since the objects of the beliefs do not actually exist in our view, there is no other route for meaning; so the meaningfulness of beliefs is dependent upon rendering them coherent within a system of ideas. Coherent systems of belief create a meaningful structure, namely 'religion,' which makes sense to us of the particular and the illusionary. This can be a very circular way to work.

In connection with this tendency to identify belief with extremes of cultural particularism and determinism, we also talk about belief as a type of deeply-held mental orientation or conviction. That is, belief is described as one type of thing, an all-or-nothing, on-or-off state. There is little evidence to warrant such a view outside of certain specific confessional practices. Both formulations of belief, as the illusion rendered meaningful when made part of a larger coherent system understood as religion and as a state of deeply-held convictions, emerge in Shweder's argument that the interpretation of beliefs is the central anthropological question — and its fault-line. He evokes the 'witch' question that lies at the root of anthropology, namely, if your informant tells you, perhaps at some risk of negative consequences, that she or he is actually a witch, what can you make of this statement when your own reality makes clear there are no witches? Generally, we must reconstruct the system of ideas that rationalize and render such statements coherent if we are to "interpret" them. This is an advance, of course, on the earlier view that such statements are proof of some sort of "primitive mentality." Yet it is hard to be convinced that an interpretation in which a belief, taken as a designated illusion that is nonetheless a 'type' of truth, that is, having its own particular reality, is all that different from interpretations based on a primitive mentality. Neither do I think anything is solved by concluding, as Shweder does, that unquestionably the informant is a witch.

A third problematic assumption, which I have addressed at length elsewhere, is the ease with which we grant belief a prior existence in order to cast it as the a priori shaper and instigator of action. While belief may well work this way some of the time, we have no evidence that this happens most of the time. Such an assumption, however, does allow us to 'explain' action by connecting it to its motivating beliefs, and from there to a larger reconstructed system, understood to be 'the' relevant system by its coherence and ability to explain the particulars with which the interpreter started.

Coherence

It is relatively recent thing for scholars to emphasize meaningful and systemic coherence in relation to what religion is all about. Only in the second half of the 20th century, for the most part, has the provision of coherence been seen as the defining role of religion, that is, what we theorists think it should do when religion clearly can no longer explain the nature of the universe or act as the authoritative source of morality. And this is not just the stance of theorists. When I quiz my students, completely unread in the relevant anthropological literature, meaningful coherence is what they also have absorbed as the expected role and real contribution of religion. They lament that they have not found it or a sufficiently steady experience of it. They are particularly aware of, and appalled by, what they see as the rampant incoherence -- the fragmentation, hypocrisy, or compromises -- in the lives of adults around them. For these students, as for most scholars of religion, religion should have a holistic coherence that delivers meaningful experiences. Yet even those who have devoted their lives to religion -- the clergy of many different persuasions -- rarely find those qualities in their religious experience if you ask them. Coherence can be found only in some explicit self-presentations by persons, texts, or institutions. We can argue for the existence of a 'deeper' coherence, of course, either in the organization of the brain, the personal psyche, the social structure, or the dynamics of culture --
all universalizations that support the major theories and disciplines of the 20th century. Awkward to use today, but still regularly invoked, these approaches contrast with attempts to see beliefs and believing as a matter of specific sets of actions or situations, that is, approaching believing as a type of social practice rather than a (true or false) linguistic statement or mental conviction.23

To indulge an autobiographical example, I originally thought to study religion because I was interested in how most people -- that is, folks not schooled in the language and history of philosophy -- made sense of their lives and worlds. I have not been heavily invested in any particular formulation of this focus, just in the general human project implied, which has to include how readily people get by without giving much attention to making any larger sense of things. It was clear to me growing up among the natives of Long Island in the 1950s and 60s -- indeed, it was a striking feature of the religious attitudes there -- just how little coherence religion actually seemed to provide or was even expected to provide. Later, in the 1970s, coherence became a more explicitly stated expectation, but as before, religiosity within the spectrum of conventional lifestyles seemed to hinge on internalizing a complex array of departmentalizations and disassociations.

On Long Island, and in other places I have come to know well, what is thought of as religion by the natives is more a matter of loosely packaged sets of behaviors -- what we can also call "bundles of behaviors" or "habits of action." For Long Islanders, these packaged sets of distinct behaviors were used to deal with such events as death, serious illness, perverse misfortune, and occasionally life-crises like birth, marriage or divorce, as well as, naturally, the ritual life of defined communities gathered at the church, synagogue, house meeting, prayer circle, or meditation group. In actual fact, family, jobs, and personal projects of service to others were more obvious over-arching systems of meaning; religion appeared to be invoked simply to support them. Long Islanders' delineation and expectations of religion are not the same as other places that could be described. Yet neither are these other places so different that we cannot articulate similarities and differences. The commonality that allows for such articulations is the 'principle of charity' defined by Davidson, a particularly felicitous if provocative basis for any new take on interpretation.25

The Chinese "Believe"

In even the most sophisticated literature on Chinese religion and culture, it is readily stated that the Chinese believe in spirits. Some Chinese will say something like that too, as I learned at a shamanic exorcism down the block from where I lived in Taipei. After the bloodied shaman was through with his spectral combat, and everyone was relaxing, the apartment owner complained that she had heard there were no ghosts in America, which seemed so unfair since large numbers of them kept bothering people in Taiwan. Analogously, there is the eloquent essay by the early 20th century sociologist, Fei Xiaotong, entitled "The World Without Ghosts," where he recounts growing up surrounded by ghosts who were as real to him as his many relatives.26 Fei used the ghost theme to set up a thoughtful contrast between Chinese and American cultures. As beliefs go, believing in spirits is not a particularly strange example, and we are very accustomed to the holistic construction known as Chinese religion, which can make such beliefs coherent among themselves and understandable as a type of meaningful truth.

Yet if the Chinese 'believe' in spirits in anything like the way my Long Island community believed in papal authority, or even the way Christian colleagues believe in a central doctrine like the divinity of Jesus Christ, then the statement that the Chinese believe in ancestral spirits is, at best, a very vague generalization that ignores everything interesting.27 It ignores the great differences from one person to another, awareness of the possibility of other positions, the individualized inner juggling and tensions, as well as pragmatic non-judgments and refusals to engage. Most language about belief, and about Chinese religion in general, leaves little room for these features and certainly does not begin to account for them.28
There are, as you would imagine, many Chinese positions on spirits. Just a sampling of the most famous and familiar ones can demonstrate the complexity of believing, at least in regard to this one topic in Chinese history. In the fifth century BCE, for example, the sage Mo Tzu argued that the degeneration of civilization since the sage-kings was due to only one thing, doubt about the existence of ghosts and spirits. Those who say "of course there are no spirits," he argued, bewilder the people and bring disorder to the empire. In fact, he continued, people can know that spirits exist in exactly the same way that they know anything exists — through reliable testimony, the consensus of textual sources that have proven their authority in other matters, and personal experience by the senses. Several centuries later, the Han dynasty writer, Wang Ch‘ung, made the opposite argument in order to refute Taoist teachings. With what has been characterized by later readers as admirable rationalism, Wang argued that "man is a creature. His rank may be ever so high ... , but his nature does not differ from other creatures. There is no creature who does not die" and soon become dust. Hence, for Wang Ch‘ung, there can be no ghosts, spirits, or gods. In the medieval period, Han Yü (768-824 CE) admonished the emperor for his public attentions to the "bone of the Buddha" in an essay that became well-known among the literate. More widespread were the ubiquitous tales of the supernatural, such as those collected by Hung Mai in the 12th century, which all turned on the moment when someone who did not believe in spirits personally experienced their intervention and came to realize the truth of their existence.

Any village or urban neighborhood in China, Taiwan or Hong Kong also yields a wide spectrum of positions on spirits. What is important about the variety, I think, is the evidence that individuals are very aware of the number of possible opinions and thus have located their own position — if it is clear enough to be called that — as a matter of some choice and deliberation. These people know that others hold different ideas, that many reject the whole thing, that people may act contradictorily, or some feign belief for self-serving reasons. There is little to suggest that a belief in spirits comes with the culture or is any one sort of belief. There is, in other words, very little systematic coherence.

As interpreters of texts and cultures, scholars of religion know that a Chinese text preaching filiality to one's ancestral spirits cannot be taken as descriptive of the actual state of cultural affairs in China, any more than a Long Island sermon about loving the poor can be taken as descriptive of Catholic life as it is really lived there. It is much more accurate, and certainly more interesting, to read admonishments and affirmations as argumentative practices, perhaps involving some complex sharing of ideals, but not as representations of a static or coherent situation.

If we argue that a person's options are still culturally limited in the forms and degrees of belief possible, clearly the limit is much further out or more blurred than we usually acknowledge. Of course, Chinese culture is extremely diverse and even by the medieval period it had seen a great deal of cultural trafficking. Perhaps this plurality influenced the boundaries of what could be thought in the culture, let alone what constituted belief and its systemic coherence. A possible counter-example dealing with a relatively more isolated society is suggested by Renato Rosaldo's account of headhunting among the Ilongot. He implies little or no debate, doubt, or discussion among the Ilongot about the efficacy, and meaningfulness, of headhunting; but he does note discussions of its necessity and periods when young men did not take heads prior to marriage. If there is no evidence of various shades of conviction and degrees of involvement in headhunting practices, then that would seem to be an unusual situation warranting study as such.

Religion

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All native statements about belief can be seen as concerned with the nature (classifying and boundaries) of religion in the sense that people on Long Island and in Beijing are constantly asking themselves what to believe, how much to believe it, and with what specific investments or...
commitments. This is true not just for so-called religious ideas, of course, but also for personal affairs or economic and political matters. People regularly ask questions that deal with what we might call the cultural boundaries and definition of religion. There are some familiar examples, such as the famous Rites Controversy provoked by the Jesuits in 17th century China, which revolved around the question whether ancestor worship was religion as such and had to be abandoned by converts, or whether it was an aspect of customary etiquette and no more threatening to converts than the bow given in greeting. Of course, this was a more critical question for the foreign missionaries than for most, though not all, Chinese. A careful ethnography by Margery Wolf details the extended deliberations in a small village in Taiwan over the question of whether a particular woman was a shaman-to-be called by the spirits or an batty and unsympathetic outsider to be shunned. Drawing on more recent examples, members of the recently outlawed group, the Falundafa (Falungong), to some extent like other qigong societies in China since the 1960s, have had to decide to what extent their practices are religious or simply therapeutic physical exercises that do not threaten other religious affiliations or fall under government control of religion. For various political reasons and agendas, their deliberations and articulated positions are carefully calibrated to keep the line between religion and therapeutic exercise more unclear than clear.

When a coherently organized systemization of beliefs is proposed by a Chinese source, then a very specific argument is being made about the way things really are. The creation of a broadly designed system of coherence is a particular rhetorical project, one undertaken indigenously as well as by outside scholars. And the difference between the practices of these two groups is, perhaps, one of the many distinctions that should lose its importance in our analyses. For example, coherence is an important part of the argument made by a subset of Chinese texts known as morality books (shanshu), which emerged in 12th century China among the opportunities of easy wood-block printing, inexpensive paper, and manageable distribution; they are still produced and circulated today. These texts are explicitly engaged in an enormous polemical effort to provide a totally comprehensive and coherent understanding of the workings of the world, both visible and invisible, in terms of universal and inexorable laws of cosmic retribution—despite evidence available to all that appears to contradict such a system. In this project, these morality books reinterpret a wide variety of local and regional practices in terms of a system said to underlie the otherwise incoherent or incomplete cosmologies attributed to Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and folk religion. As such, this project often echoes scholarly studies that present a coherent overview, at least more coherent than the last scholarly attempt, of a definable cultural tradition, although such overviews can be found particularly unhelpful come a real encounter with some aspect of the said tradition.

As a type of test of the hypothesis I am proposing, one can look again at a well-known example of an underlying and apparently determinative cultural structure, namely, Arthur Wolf’s ethnographic account of the different grades of spirit currency burned to ghosts, ancestors, and gods—coarse yellow paper, paper with a silver appliqué, and finer paper with a gold appliqué, respectively. Although focusing on one part of Taiwanese rural society, Wolf argued that this system of paper types demonstrates a more basic and wider cultural understanding of the organization of the cosmos, one "that mirrors the social landscape of its adherents. His ethnography is often cited as evidence of a latent structure in Chinese folk practice, in reference to which a particular belief, such as the existence of ancestral spirits, makes sense to people and accounts for a variety of related actions. However, it is equally persuasive, and correct, to argue that Wolf represented this practice as more coherent and routine than it really was or is. Extended ethnographic observation adds so many qualifications and regional differences that the original assertion can be regarded, at best, as heavily generalized, that is, as much suggestive than descriptive."
Several sociological studies have attempted to assess the degree of coherence among the beliefs to which people are willing to attest, and their results reinforce each other: there is surprisingly little coherence among people's formulated beliefs and it decreases as one moves from more educated and articulate people, comfortable with narrative or abstract categories, to the less-educated, who are not as apt to use them. Two of these studies also inquired into the "meaning" of various ritual practices and found little consensus among the explanations given, even when people were asked about ritual features that had well-known, even memorized, doctrinal explanations associated with them. Instead of these formalized and accessible explanations of belief, which informants could volunteer when pressed, people routinely preferred to use their own, fairly personal 'takes,' which used very loosely related ideas and claimed to be rooted in experience.

My own research into ritual activity makes me tend to think of beliefs not as something prior to or separate from action, that is, not as something mental, cognitive, or linguistic in opposition to the physical or active. If there are habits of the body, there can be habits of thought and expression as well as speech and self-presentation. They are all social activities. While I use terms like 'religion' — albeit with all the historical qualifications and hesitations shared by others — when talking about Chinese materials, the language of belief seems more distorting, in particular, by specifically imposing a false sense of coherence, conviction, systemization, and meaning. We cannot appeal to 'belief' to describe how people exist within their cultures; yet without 'belief,' it is not clear what we mean by 'religion.' If it seems easier to talk about Chinese religion, rather than Chinese beliefs, it may be simply because one is more comfortable today attributing a working coherence among cultural phenomena rather than implying the illusion and falsity of specific ideas.

This problem brings up an interesting association, namely, the strange fortunes of what would seem to be a particularly Chinese "bundle of behaviors," the prognostications of fengshui (wind and water), which are ubiquitous in California and becoming familiar elsewhere in the United States. Going beyond the dabbling of "new-agers" or the concerns of transplanted Chinese, fengshui is also being used by all sorts of serious people as a type of back-up system of cosmic control and insurance. It is possible that one day, we may compare its global spread to such other cultural practices as food spicing and tea drinking. A similar phenomenon can be seen in the enduring popularity of the Asian martial arts, especially taiqi, begun in the late 1970s and early 80s, or Japanese Zen meditation, begun in the 1930s. Fengshui, taiqi and zazen are closely tied to ritual postures considered very basic to Chinese and Japanese culture, yet they have been readily translated to the more pluralist sections of American society. The viable translatability and subsequent longevity of these sets of practices indicate the existence of something not readily caught in either universals or particulars, something both more durable and mutable and much less hindered by incoherence with other sets of practice.

In short, such packaged sets of behaviors blur 'religion' as such. As a feature of a global society and culture, the translatability of fengshui, taiqi and zazen is evidence of cultural properties going in many directions — perhaps too many for our notions of religion and culture to track. In the end, religion may vanish as any sort of empirical entity in one place, only to emerge in another, as attested by the growing numbers of Christian evangelicals in Beijing as well as the government officials trying to control them with a stretched classification schema. To appreciate these issues is to be more fully historical in our understanding and use of theoretical categories.

Fengshui is not particularly illuminated by being regarded as a belief or part of a more comprehensive religion, terms that return to the defining polarities of universalism and particularism. Nor do the activities of members of the Falundafa fit traditional theories of religion, although they do evoke many older models in Chinese history. Theorists do not need to stop using the terms belief and religion, but their historical freight must be made part of them. And theorists do not need to stop theorizing, of course — after all, it is a distinct cultural practice
to seek universal explanations and doing so must be as legitimate as offering incense to one's ancestors -- as long as no one gets hurt. But the coherence or incoherence of practices can be explored on a more realistic footing if scholarship can let go of the transcendent status still clutched by Shweder and the quest for a logically prior theory of interpretation still sought by Davidson. Without the panorama provided by these perspectives, we will have to spend a lot time figuring out how to situate ourselves, but the alternatives do not seem to take us very far either.
ENDNOTES


3 This point is made by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. in "Belief," in Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), pp. 21-35.


6 "What is the criterion of reliability, dependability? Suppose you give a general description as to when you say a proposition has a reasonable weight of probability. When you call it reasonable, is this only to say that for it you have such and such evidence, and for other you haven't?"

7 "For instance, we don't trust the account given of an event by a drunk man."


10 In a section relevant to analyzing some forms of religious beliefs, Davidson suggests that an indeterminacy of meaning or translation should not be seen as a failure to capture important distinctions, but rather that these distinctions themselves are not that significant. In other words, indeterminacy can be important. See Davidson, p. 154.


Among those who have addressed this topic, let me simply note Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993); and Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious."

One has only to recall the popularity and fecundity of Jorge Luis Borges’ fanciful description of a Chinese encyclopedia, which was identified as Chinese to locate such wonderfully exotic and still totally alien difference. I will only note here Michel Foucault’s use of the image in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p.xv. One of the stronger arguments against the Western terminology of religion for understanding Chinese religion is given in Jordan Paper’s *The Spirits are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion* (Albany: SUNY 1995), especially pp. 2-12, even though Paper argues that the comparative study of religion is still viable.

In his 1980 study, *Ilongot Headhunting 1883-1944: A Study in Society and History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1980), Renato Rosaldo’s recognition of the problems with anthropological analysis led him to abandon many anthropological concepts and adopt an extremely biographical, even autobiographical approach.

Shweder, “Post-Nietzschean Anthropology,” pp. 109-10. It is interesting to note the difference between the interpretive tasks represented by Shweder’s witch claim, on the one hand, and Davidson’s examples (pace Taski?), on the other, in which he ponders the interpretive process involved in understanding Kurt’s statement, *es regnet*, and Karl’s statement, *es schneit* (Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth*, pp. 29 and 141, etc.).


Shweder, “Post-Nietzschean Anthropology,” pp. 109-10. For Shweder, “cultural anthropology will probably come to an end when it comes up with an incontestable answer to the witch question” (p. 109).


Important influences on the interpretive importance of coherence have been Peter L. Berger’s arguments about the construction of a nomos as a meaningful order (*The Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociology of Religion* [New York: Doubleday, 1967], p. 19; and Clifford Geertz’s arguments about religions as a system (“Religion as a Cultural System” in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* [London: Tavistock, 1966], reprinted in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* [New York: Basic Books, 1973], pp. 87-125; and a bit more distant, Claude Levi-Strauss’s structuralism (e.g., *The Savage Mind* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966]).

It is interesting that theorists talk about coherence as something projected, while believers and would-be believers almost always talk of it as something found. For another discussion of coherence, also see Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner, “Clifford Geertz’s Long-Lasting Moods, Motivations, and Metaphysical Conceptions,” *Journal of Religion* (1999): 617-640, especially p. 626.

My evidence here is simply personal conversation with clergy primarily, though not exclusively, in the Christian, Jewish and Buddhist traditions.

Needham suggests this direction, belief as social action, although he does not develop it; anthropology has done a better job at grasping this stance than religious studies, although they have done so at the cost of the relativism for which anthropology is so often accused.

Davidson expands W. V. Quine's use of this idea. See *Inquiries into Truth*, p. 136, note 16.


Mo Tzu, "On Ghosts" in Victor Mair, ed., *The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature* (New York: Columbia University, 1994), pp. 31-39. These are, of course, exactly the reasons that I 'believe' in nuclear physics, space travel, many medical treatments, or the usefulness of 'talking things out' in a marriage -- to name just a few common examples.


Rosaldo tried to explore the practical without the usual judgments of the time by attempting to see the rationality of headhunting and by looking to find aspects of his own experience illuminated by his encounter with Ilongot culture. See his *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989; 1993). In *Ilongot Headhunting 1883-1974*, particularly pp. 55, Rosaldo describes the Ilongot concept of history and Ilongot unwillingness to accept the veracity of stories of the past, as well as the lack of any uniformity to their accounts. "In general," Rosaldo writes, "Ilongots are unlikely to accept as true any narrative about events they neither saw for themselves nor heard about from an eyewitness" (p. 55). Of course, in this passage Rosaldo is assessing attitudes toward stories and explanations, not toward activities that are considered (by whom?) central to the culture, like headhunting. In terms of comparative ethics, one approach to all the other problems of cultural comparison and objectivity, Rosaldo has addressed the 'ethics' of Ilongot headhunting. In "Of Headhunters and Soldiers: Separating Cultural and Ethical Relativism," *Santa Clara Magazine* 42, no. 2 (Fall 2000): 18-21. Rosaldo argues that the acceptance of cultural differences, even extreme ones, does not lead to an acceptance of the chaos of ethical relativism.


Belief, Beliefs, Believing: Declensions of “The Problem”

It is impossible to be nonchalant about the fact that the topic of belief has been addressed at this university for about as long as universities as such have existed. As home base for centuries of theologians, philosophers, linguists, and anthropologists, who have constantly redefined the so-called “problem of belief,” one is automatically humbled, if not crushed, by the weight of the history of all these opinions. Is there anything left to be said? Of course. Knowledge is not a glass one can fill up or a wall that is built, brick by brick, generation by generation, to be judged someday as sufficient, if not complete. Knowledge is a constant exercise of interpretation in which all the components – the interpreter, the interpreted, and the contextual reasons to bother in the first place – are always shifting. So, pinned, perhaps, but not crushed by the weight of history, let me give belief yet another try.

Belief is identified in different ways by philosophers, anthropologists, and cultural theorists, but it has become something of a habit to refer to the issue as “the problem.” Even across the full spread of academic disciplines, there are scholars who will identify belief as the problem of their respective fields. In the time I have with you today, I would like to explore the problem status that belief
for the formal study of religion in particular. I wish in doing so I could expose the vacuous triviality or sententious cynicism of the current research trajectories, and then map a brilliant route through the problem. But I can only work to make an argument for a line of thinking that may allow us to ask some fresh and pertinent questions; it will not solve all the problems identified with belief and certainly would not satisfy any of my predecessors in the preceding centuries of lectures on this topic. In an area like this one, an additional perspective cannot improve on the work of others in any absolute sense; but it may have the virtue of supplying more effective words for the questions of this generation or a more effective approach to work with such questions in a clearer fashion.

It should be noted at the outset that few terms in any discipline spread themselves across the lexicon of the European languages as broadly as belief. Its uses are legion. One uses the term in reference to the God of biblical qualities and one’s confidence in a particular television weathercast. That old master of the English language, W. C. Fields, captured the crux of the dilemma when he characteristically pronounced that “Everyone should believe in something. I believe I’ll have another drink.” Fields aside, the relevant literature stretches from David Hume to Donald Davidson and from Wilfred Cantwell Smith to Slavoj Žižek. One is informed by the work of Paul Connerton and Danielle Hervieu-Léger on memory; Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau on practice; Rodney
Needham on the significant anthropological issues; Paul Veyne and Donald Lopez have been historical and theoretical touchstones. And the theological tradition is indispensable, of course, from Tertullian to Tillich, Irenaeus to Rahner. Belief is clearly an issue in human reasoning and communication, cognition and memory, psychological orientation and social conditioning, religious reflection, and analyses of secularism. I want to cobble together a rather simple direction using my ideas about their ideas primarily to foster a long overdue discussion in my own field, the history of religions, spurring it with an exploration of the value of the term as an analytic tool in the study of religion.

I. Surveying “The Problem”

The popular press is very ready to see particular problems posed by belief and believers. Several years ago I could note studies on the silliness of religious beliefs, such as Wendy Kaminer’s *Sleeping with Terrestrials: the Rise of Irrationalism and the Perils of Piety* and Michael Shermer’s *Why People Believe Weird Things*. Since then, reactions to the terrorism of 9/11 in America have come into print, examining not just extreme Islamists, but the religious radicalism seen in American politics. Most recently, Sam Harris has won much attention for his stinging critique of all forms of religious belief in *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and Future of Reason*. However, such strong reactions are also due to the
decision by the state of Kansas school board to introduce “intelligent design” along side evolution in the state’s science curriculum. Although their decision was successfully challenged in court, and half of the school board was subsequently voted out of office, the specter of religion creeping into science classes is providing much grist for the mills of indignant scholars. It would be hard to be more iconoclastic than the book by the distinguished philosopher of science, Daniel Dennett. In Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon, he compares religion to a virus that can thrive in the body of a receptive host, whose subsequent (irrational) behavior enables the propagation of the virus species.

These opinions constitute the latest chapter in Western culture’s perpetual polarization of belief and reason, faith and rationality, religion and science. These issues were articulated most clearly, of course, in the social reorganizations and formal documents of the Enlightenment, where the poles of this dialectic were set. Yet we are still seeing our culture in terms of faith versus reason even though we clearly live in a very post-Enlightenment world. Indeed, the Enlightenment paradigm now encodes a wide variety of ideological if not material interests, specifically, in America, biblical religion versus Darwinian science. Scientists, theologians, hack writers all contribute to the fray that politicians have been very willing to exploit. All start from the same stark duality in which science is the natural opposite of religion, each pole constantly alert to contain the power wielded
by the other. Only a savvy journalist or two has suggested the degree to which this simplistic view of religion and science is a play of shadow puppets manipulated by a variety of interest groups on the political playing field. In the end, the paradigm of reason versus belief is deeply ingrained in the discourse of modern culture even though it is not a very good depiction of the conditions of modern culture.\(^\text{11}\)

In the discourse community of philosophy, quite beyond the machinations of the popular marketplace of ideas, the qualities of belief are not opposed to reason and simplified Enlightenment dichotomies have been left behind, although not forgotten. The views of thinkers from Hume to Wittgenstein could be surveyed at this point to illustrate a lively philosophical tradition, continued by such late 20\(^\text{th}\) century figures as Stuart Hampshire, Gilbert Harman, and Richard Rorty; with Rorty one also evokes the lineage of American pragmatism from William James through John Dewey.\(^\text{12}\) In an earlier publication I focused on the American philosopher Donald Davidson, at some length, to understand better the “problem of belief” as it figures in current philosophical analyses. In striking contrast to the popular perspective, philosophy generally thinks of belief as a universal quality, playing an integral role in a basic holism (not a division) interlacing thought and action in general. Davidson’s “principle of charity,” a name appreciated especially by the novice, argues that broad agreement is the condition for any linguistic understanding of each other.\(^\text{13}\) Asserting that “belief is central to all kinds of
thought,” he explains that belief is what allows us to take for granted general perceptions of the material world that are basic to the formation of thoughts, spoken statements, and the conditions needed to understand each other. Belief and meaningfulness are dependent on each other, and have a formal role in the act of interpretation.

To give a more specific example, Davidson argues that we have to believe that the statements someone makes are or can be true, even if we conclude he or she is lying, mistaken, or crazy. Thus we must infer belief to grant the meaning needed to make the most basic act of interpreting each other. This is probably enough Davidson to illustrate the contrast he presents to the popular view opposing belief with the meaningfulness of reason; instead of making belief the weak of half of this type of dualism, a philosopher like Davidson locates the problem of belief in the universal act of person-to-person interpretation.

In the set of closely intertwined disciplines -- anthropology/sociology, cognitive theory, and the study of religion -- the problem of belief is conceived in quite distinct ways, but in each case the fundamental issue concerns the degree of holism that is understood as basic to social understanding. Still, these fields would not use Davidson’s terminology, so comparing their views of belief is rather difficult. But for most scholars of culture, belief is the problem of universalism versus particularism: that is, what can we assume to be common to all people
simply by virtue of our common roots in evolution, history, or even the human condition, and what is culturally particular to a social practice even while subject to forces of diffusion that can push certain activities well beyond an original point of germination. However, universality can sometimes mean common to all social life and sometimes simply “mentally accessibility to all.” In the latter case, because one may be familiar with belief in the God of the Abrahamic religions, one may feel – rightly or wrongly – that one has some access to how ancient Greeks believed in their pantheon of gods.

Particularism suggests that we have no such access to the experiences of another religion and, indeed, can only make sense of what is so foreign by attempting to reconstruct, only more or less accurately, a system of ideas in which specific pieces can be illuminated. By the time any universal or particularist project is underway, it is probably rife with assumptions and precarious leaps of logic. Yet, at the same time, it is easy to see a measure of common sense to both positions – that we can understand something about other human experiences and we should not assume that we can understand anything about them.

Few have tried as hard as the anthropologist Richard Shweder to find a reasonable synthesis to the opposition of universalism and particularism. In a series of studies in the 1980s he tried to clarify all the different versions of the arguments on both sides, and then he attempted to elucidate a self-consciously post-positivist,
postmodernist position. Shweder argued that the discipline of anthropology was the product of a collision between our notions of universality and particularity. This collision created a “fault-line,” he argued, using the metaphor of continental plates, which can be illustrated by various vexing scenarios that come up routinely for the anthropologist. Indeed, Shweder suggests, were anyone able to resolve such scenarios, anthropology as we know it would probably not be needed any more; the whole field would collapse. A typical scenario is the “witch question,” which is actually not so removed from the possible experience within a multi-cultural society. Accord to Shweder, the witch scenario unfolds when your informant, the person whose judgment you have so greatly relied upon, takes you aside one day and admits, possibly at some degree of danger to himself, that he is really a witch. You come from a tradition that does not believe in witches, so do you accept this statement by your informant as true or not true?15

With the argument that the interpretation of beliefs is the central anthropological question and the distinctive fault-line of the discipline, Shweder’s answer is two-fold: unquestionably, the person is a witch (in this way Shweder recognizes the culturally relative and particular), but as the anthropologist who must reconstruct the system of ideas that “makes sense” of this belief, he can claim a type of “transcendence” of the particular and the relative (thereby recognizing a capacity to perceive the universal in some form). Shweder hastens to add that this
sense of transcendence must not be accompanied by any sense of superiority, since one culture is simply using its categories to interpret another -- and the same operation is no doubt being performed by the informant. Shweder wants to establish a position of relative “transcendence without superiority” with regard to the “realities” that another culture presents to one’s own cultural categories.\textsuperscript{16} I think that Shweder has, in fact, described one of the ways we negotiate the fault-line; he does not describe how to resolve it. Anthropology may be safe for another day.\textsuperscript{17}

The respected anthropologist Katherine Ewing provides a curious postscript to Shweder’s fault-line “witch” question.\textsuperscript{18} Ewing’s works on Sufism, particularly the highly secret relationship between disciple and Sufi master, and she contributed a remarkable account of personal experience in the journal, \textit{American Anthropologist}. Subtitled “The Temptation to Believe,” Ewing used her own experiences with a Sufi master, who seemed to be directing her dreams, to articulate a common experience among anthropologists thoroughly embedded in a culture, the drift into a generally vague but sporadically more explicit form of belief in the ideas they are studying, often derided as “going native.” Ewing describes how the circumstances of her \textit{dreams} left her wobbling in her confidence as an objective ethnographer. To an extent not clear to herself, she became a type a believer and, therefore, an insider--someone who understood and was told more.\textsuperscript{19}
Yet going native can leave one unable to explain any of this insider information to one’s professional community by virtue of vows of confidence, or simply the inability to convey the convincing insider experience.20

In contrast to the fine parsing of the problem of belief in anthropology, the term presents few concerns for cognitive theory, a field that is currently the locus of much excited debate by scholars of all types. Composed of psychologists, neurologists, evolutionary biologists and all the subfields in between, cognitive theory gives a great deal of attention to why and how people belief. One recent title is explicit -- “Why Would Anyone Believe in God?”21 The most common “short” answer identifies believing as a cognitive process selected for its adaptive value in the evolutionary task of human beings surviving in stable groups. This makes believing part of what created thinking, sociable humans, although some cognitive theorists are quick to point out that it is a vestige of evolution that ill equips us for modern life.

Despite a focus on etiology of belief, cognitive theory is a bit quick to define it as the religious act of positing the existence of what they call “counter-intuitive agencies.”22 So, while philosophers regard religious believing as just one instance of the larger cognitive phenomenon of belief, so far that is the main interest to cognitive theory. Most cognitivists are unabashedly scientific, intent on
“explaining” (*eklaren*, not *verstehen*) why irrational beliefs, or religion, came into existence and remained long past its most obvious adaptive uses.\textsuperscript{23}

For those in the fields of neurology, the neurophysiology of cognition, or evolutionary biology, their interest in religion is tied to new research tools like magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) as well as the synergy of these new fields coming together around new maps of the mind and paradigms of consciousness and neural processing.\textsuperscript{24} Their apparent lack of hermeneutical interest in the challenges posed by language is in keeping with the style of science generally, but it makes their work feel very alien to humanists. When they locate “the problem of belief, they solve it, that is, they explain what is going on. Even when their explanations can only be speculative, they sound very reductionist to scholars concerned to interpret (*verstehen*) rather than explain (*eklaren*).\textsuperscript{25}

However, the late anthropologist, Roy Rappaport, used cognitive theory, among other things, to develop a speculative account but insightful and popular analysis of the nature of belief. He assumed its biological evolution and focused on the dynamics of its social enactment, through which an experience and concept of “the sacred” was generated among human beings and functioned, in turn, to mold them as *human beings*. This social process involved, as Vico, Comte, and Hume all suggested, an experience of power and an act of submission to the idea of a higher authority. Rappaport playfully describes the concept of power in this way: “The
unfalsifiable supported by the undeniable yields the unquestionable, which transforms the dubious, the arbitrary, and the conventional into the correct, the necessary, and the natural.” The process of deferring the quality and significance unquestionableness to the unknown comes to constitute sanctity itself; it is as a form of absolute authority that the sacred makes possible “the foundation upon which the human way of life stands.” For Rappaport, belief in sanctity enables humanity to evolve social community, intellectual reflexivity, and the experience of transcendence itself.26

The idea that religion may be a selected adaptive feature in human evolution is far from new; it goes back to many pre-Darwinian notions of social evolution. In mid-twentieth century phenomenological theories of religion, an approach based on religion as sui generis or non-reducible to other forces, scholars such as Mircea Eliade would even speculate about evolutionary origins before confining discussion to the “phenomenon” at hand, the origins of which should not matter.27 The phenomenology of religion approach, otherwise known as the history of religions, has been significantly derelict, compared to its disciplinary neighbors, in discussing belief. Perhaps the need to distinguish itself from theology explains the odd lacuna in their decades of analysis. Yet it is surprising that belief, as a separate entry, was left out of the multi-volume Encyclopedia of Religion edited by Eliade and published in 1986.28 Instead, the reader is told to “See Doubt (and Belief),”
which provides a thoughtful but very theological engagement of the topic. Belief may have been ceded to the theologians in order to help define the borders of the phenomenological study of religion. With an exception here and here, my colleagues in the history of religions -- compared to philosophers, anthropologists and cognitive theorists -- have not seen a “problem” with belief. In fact, they do not seem to see belief at all, although they refer to it all the time.\textsuperscript{29}

II. Universal and Particular

The preceding discussion has been a brief scurry through some background for the problem of belief. Let me now focus on one of the most central issues and illustrate it with materials more germane to historical studies – and that is, the universality or particularity of our references to belief. In other words, can we say that all people believe in religious entities? Can we describe all religious ideas as beliefs? Or does “believing” imply a very specific type of self-conscious relationship with specific types of divine entities? The ethnographic evidence is mixed. In 1972 Rodney Needham noted the expedient ease with which many ethnographers blithely claimed that such and such people believe in this and that god or gods, comfortable with the assumption that the English verb “to believe” captures the particular religious sensibilities of a very different people.\textsuperscript{30} Of course, as the Shweder discussion made clear, a universal assumption about the know-
ability of other peoples and cultures has been basic to anthropology. Similarly, a fundamental assumption about the unity of believing as a phenomenon has supported the whole enterprise of comparative religions and most “world religions” textbooks.

In contrast to those who found belief everywhere, Needham pointed out the close attention to local terms first used by Evans-Pritchard in his study of the Nuer and their theology. Needham himself examined the indigenous terms for anything comparable to belief among the Navaho, Hinduism, the dialects of the Philippines, and the Penan of Borneo. The exercise gave evidence, he suggested, of “the bewildering variety of senses attaching to words … indifferently translated by the English ‘believe’.”

Most recently, the Buddhologist Donald Lopez analyzed the term belief for its usefulness in the study of religion, challenging the assumption of universality. For Lopez, our notion of belief as something common to all religions is part of our blindness to difference and willingness to convert the world to one way of thinking. He argues that what we intend by belief has a clear historical locus in the matrix of meanings forged by early Christianity and developed in the course of Christian history as it sought to define its theological orthodoxy and institutional jurisdiction. It was during the Inquisition, in fact, that belief acquired its current distinctive gloss by which outward action is deemed an inadequate indication of
the views one harbors deep within the heart. Only torture can reveal those sentiments and elicit true repentance, if needed.

Lopez illustrates his point with the dramatic narrative of Peter of Verona, a 13th century preacher asked by Pope Gregory IX to launch an Inquisition against the Gnostic heresy of the Cathars or Albigensians. This early Inquisition institutionalized testing a person for one's true beliefs, while defining the errors and punishments associated with the sin of heresy against the church. But Lopez notes that the Inquisition was also deeply involved in the confiscation of property, which added to the local zeal of the movement, and in a struggle for political control of a great deal of southern France between the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. Peter of Verona, early Inquisitor, eventually became a martyr to the cause: the story has it that as he was dying from a stab wound, he inscribed "credo," the beginning of the orthodox creed, on the ground with his own blood.

The credo, of course, points back to the long historical importance of oral and public assertion of one's beliefs, although all the creeds of the early church arose in the context of disputing heresies. However, summing up a great deal of history in this one brief historical sketch of Peter the Inquisitor and martyr, Lopez concludes that Christianity came to distinguish belief not by what a person said publicly, but by "the invisible content of the mind." Since the means for identifying believers from non-believers would give great power to the one
deciding who had what in their hearts, Lopez also concludes that the idea of belief “is neither natural nor universal. It might be described as an ideology, an idea that arises from a specific set of material interests.”

Lopez develops a second example describing the 1881 Buddhist Catechism with which Colonel Henry Steele Olcott sought to bring Singhalese Buddhism into the modern world. In Olcott’s understanding, Buddhism was a religion and, therefore, a system of beliefs. So he was shocked by how poorly the pious monks of Sri Lanka could recite back to him the basic beliefs that early translators had made so familiar to Olcott. He was especially concerned that Buddhists be able to hold off the growing influence of Christian missionaries who were destroying the indigenous culture. Pointing to Olcott’s “ideology of belief,” Lopez suggests that his assumptions about the universal nature of religion were rooted in Christian history and doomed to obfuscate real understanding of Buddhism.

Although Lopez’s argument for the cultural particularism of belief is welcome for taking up the topic of belief at all, I cannot fully agree with his conclusions. Still, in a publication of my own not long after his, I indirectly supported a similar position by challenging the frequently quoted formula that “the Chinese believe in spirits.” In fact, the closer one tried to pin down such a generalization, the more complicated became the ideas of “the Chinese” as well as “believe in spirits.”
III Choice

My arguments supplemented those that Lopez invoked when he countered the assumed "universality" of belief by pointing to the cultural particularity of the concept's origins. But Lopez was convinced that the concept of belief originated in the matrix of Christianity and that its onslaught obfuscated the real dynamics of local Singhalese Buddhism. I would question Lopez's analysis in these two areas. First, does the concept of belief that we have today, which went out to conquer the world in the 1st century and, he suggests, again in the 16th, really originate in Christianity? Paul Veyne's study of belief among the ancient Greeks complicates the picture, as does a new study of the legacy of Pythagoras and several studies of 1st century BC/AD Judaism. The more we learn about how the Christian matrix of belief fits into the full historical mosaic of social forces at the time of its supposed creation, the less originality we can automatically ascribe to that very successful religion. In other words, I am not convinced its so Christian.

Second, although Lopez focus on just this one encounter of Olcott and turn of the century Singhalese Buddhism, he knows better than I that the British were far from the first Europeans in Sir Lanka, that the Europeans were not the first to conquer and colonize the island, and that the island had been swept by the winds of other cultural influences for several millennia. It is also well accepted that the Sri
Lankans had the right to appropriate colonial categories, such as the idea of beliefs one learns by heart, in whatever way they wished. And they did. In fact, great parts of the world today increasingly understand themselves in terms of religious movements involving what Lopez describes as the Christian ideas of choice, conversion, and commitment that make up the Western notion of belief. If the three fastest growing religions are Catholicism, Islam and Christian evangelicalism, then belief is not a category we can dismiss for its checkered ideological past in the hands of papal Inquisitors or colonial catechists. It has meaning to many today.

Two short studies by de Certeau are provocative for rethinking the issue of belief. He suggests, perhaps unwittingly, that most modern European languages allow sufficient looseness to the idea of belief to justify the very general sense in which we might interpret the term, that is, as the understanding that more often than not human beings think of themselves as coexisting in the cosmos with other invisible beings, usually sacred or superhuman, and this coexistence involves certain interactions with them. De Certeau himself assumes universality in his analysis of how believing sets up a temporally defined contractual relationship, marked by the investment of one party with the clear sense of something eventually due in return. Yet he is a sociologist of modern industrial society, suggesting that today we can never really understand belief. It is a wary modern
conclusion, based on the popular view, he suggests, that for us now there are “too many things to believe and not enough credibility to go around.”

De Certeau actually dips in and out of two understandings of belief, ones that would be familiar to Needham. In one line of analysis he cleverly describes belief as what we have when we no longer believe. Yet in pointing to this “fallen” state, de Certeau assumes a disruptive change in some automatic cultural moment, a change that came with degrees of choice about what to believe or how much to believe it. When the cultural status quo is rocked by change, then “beliefs” are apt to be formulated or clarified. They may even be compared, the new with the old, if only to attempt to dismiss the influence of a visiting anthropologist or missionary. In this discussion de Certeau seems to imply the existence of an innocent, pre-choice, unself-conscious mode of transaction with the gods, who are not formulated in concepts any more than they need to be. Stories, titles, distinctive ritual greetings or offerings – these are the ways such innocents believe; certainly not in reasoned concepts. Only when the missionaries arrive, the Phoenicians land, the Jews conquer Canaan, or cultures clash, are presented with choices, which, as a break from the old, must be accompanied by an extra show of commitment. Then we are no longer dealing with the gods; we are dealing just with our beliefs.

IV. Rejection
In contrast to Lopez and de Certeau, Paul Veyne does not make arguments about the universal and the particular; he talk about “modalities” of belief and the effect of choices. He describes one modality as coming into being when the option of doubt opens up a new type of choice, the unprecedented social position of being in a position to doubt. Veyne describes Pausanius, laboring over his compilation of the stories of local gods, deciding that a “kernel of truth” must reside in the many redundant tales he had amassed. Before him, of course, Herodotus reported what many different people told him with the amused distance of one not closely attached to a particular version. And Thucydides researched the stories he was told, to create one clear narrative of the Peloponnesian war that, being the most reliable version he could determine, he believed in. These are not the triumph of logos over mythos, Veyne suggests, but the development of mythos, and history, and criticism—all modalities of belief, co-existing modalities of truth.

Several elements come together in Veyne’s account that will not be easily undone in Western culture (creating a limit to what can co-exist). First, the cultural pluralism seen in the plethora of local tales that Pausanius gathers, the socially shaded perspectives compared by Thucydides, the culturally varied material reported by Herodotus. Secondly, the process of comparison and choice: due to the pluralism that he stumbled upon, Pausanius chose to assume a so-called “historical kernel” of truth in all the myths, while entertaining a new type of doubt about the
details, especially the repetitive mythic themes. It is a familiar modality of both believing and doubting. Thucydides took the other extreme, to leave out the fantastic altogether in favor of a distinctly non-mythic realism demonstrated by the internal logic of the narration itself. In this choice, *mythos* is defined as the incredible and doubtful, irrelevant to the type of critical history in which Thucydides now believed.\(^4^3\)

By the time Christianity developed in the long simmering melting pot of the Mediterranean world, if you got around a bit beyond your own village, your beliefs would identify and locate you; if you got around a lot more, they were apt to involve some personal choices, whether it was Mithraism, attachment to a particular Roman god, convictions about the Christ in any of the various versions of his significance, or involvement in some sect of Jewish nationalism. When personal choice entered the picture, believing was always seen as a type of conversion away from the rule of reason, which would never be more than the rule of the familiar, the status quo, simple common sense; exercising choice was an acceptance of the incredible, remaking your old identity by the choosing as well as by what was chosen. A set of beliefs to which one orally testified became the crux of being Christian, or a follower of Mithra, a devotee of Jupiter, and so on.

Textual culture -- seen in the different enterprises of Pausanius, the Essenes, or the letter-writing Christian Paul -- could make its own claims as a medium, that
is, develop its own modalities of belief and doubt. The gathering together of a canonical set of scriptures, the way so many Christianities were weeded out of the early Church and history, established some of its authority by the attributions attributed to people who had been there as witnesses. While this made the texts a great source of authority for the revelation of Christ, oral and public recitation of the credo made one a Christian.\textsuperscript{14} Continuing to work Veyne’s generous term, further modalities of belief would open up between scriptural testimony, on the one hand, and the institutionalization of apostolic succession claiming authority over them, on the other. This early distinction would to ripen into the great divide of the 16\textsuperscript{th} century Reformation.

Lopez might be analyzed historically a bit further. In which case, early Christianity pulled together many influences to imbue the practices of believing with its own particular set of meanings. As with every winner on the historical stage, Christianity developed to define the parameters of believing for so much subsequent European history, although other local models always existed, if with difficulty. Within the Christian matrix, belief was premised on individual choice and, as such, could always vie with the traditions of tribe, city, or family. It was a matter of choice, conversion, commitment, with doubt of the other firming up into rejection of all else, at times even repulsion. This process was ritualized early on in the institution of the catechumenate. At the same time, the succession of creeds
articulated by the early churches continued to ritualize entrance into the rightful "house" through the oral profession of the doctrines of one’s faith.

Lopez mentions the feature of rejection in passing; and I think he is very right to note this aspect of the Christian model. Its modality of choice clearly meant a concomitant rejection: I believe in this, not that; I am a Christian, not a Roman, not a Jew. Choice does not require rejection, but it became the final component for the emergent Christianity that cast and recast itself in those early centuries. Indeed, after so much time modern Christians have had to learn how commitment and rejection can relax into choice and mere doubt, otherwise real tolerance would be inconceivable.

V. Believing

Yet Lopez’s analysis raises some questions.

First, is Christianity really the model of believing in the many of cultures of Europe as well as its colonial legatees? Has the model remained fixed in nuance and emphasis? And, can a certain historical set of Christian assumptions indelibly shape our sense of the term in all the European languages for all time? Christians certainly fit the traditions of the Jews, Muslims and various pagans into their own model, and what did not fit could not be easily thought. Lopez is undoubtedly correct in his characterization of the substance of that model for some of medieval
history, but since the Enlightenment, and probably the Renaissance, that model has been tweaked and refitted and subject to interpretation. As a small example, I have known Catholic institutions for a good part of my life, in one connection or another, and I know that up close 20th century Roman Catholic believing has changed dramatically in a mere half century in most places in Europe and America. I think the question of historical homogeneity impacts how we view the probable origins of the model. Were the really Christian?

Second, an easy contrast to the religious matrix of choice, conversion, commitment and rejection would be the religious cultures of the primarily oral peoples Europeans encountered. Yet the assumption that such peoples were all sufficiently isolated to afforded no real socio-cultural choices to individuals until the Christian missionary arrived is probably overstated and in danger of propagating, under the table, so to speak, more of a Christian-centered understanding of history. As an assumption, this theoretical isolation and lack of choice among indigenous peoples is probably very dependent on a Protestant tendency to misunderstand orality itself as inherently primitive; this view made it very difficult for the earliest ethnographers to even refer to indigenous spiritualities as "religions" – and when they could, the implied continuity across cultures implied was not appreciated by European religious, and academic, authorities. We are increasingly learning that indigenous cultures in the past were rarely so isolated
or marked by consensus that the individual had no choices to make, such as trading further afar, joining the cults that would arise at times of stress, absorbing more quickly the influence of conquering tribes whose enlarged kingdoms would evolve more complex religious patterns, or simply the decision to assume a larger role in the ceremonial life of the community -- like the blinded hunter, Ogotemmeli, who was the keeper of the Dogon sacred lore imparted to Marcel Griaule. 46 No matter how small and isolated, everyone in a community would not be involved with their spirits and cultural lore to the same degree or in the same way. 47 This is not to deny that some communities appear to engage in whole-sale rejections of outside influences, such as the missionaries, in favor of their own traditions. But I do question the uniqueness of the “choice and conversion of the individual” model.

These are not technical quibbles aimed at Lopez’s argument; I think they are inherently challenges to the degree of “particularity” to which we think we can resort when jettisoning master narratives and grand universalities. If the Christian model of belief described by Lopez really has older roots and many varietals, and oral cultures do not prevent the presence of some of the components of this so-called Christian model, then an even more central -- methodological -- question looms. Is the historical freight of the notion of belief in the European world so set and insurmountable that the term has not or cannot evolve to be used -- with care and imagination -- to describe other ways of believing? To say it cannot could
suggest that other cultures do not believe in anything like the sense of the term. Do we really want to be so particular that we are thrown back on another form of ethnocentrism?

I do not think that stretching our term belief to attempt to describe very differently constructed relationships with the supernatural is demanded by the hermeneutics of suspicion that drives a good post-modernist historian. Neither can I imagine any usage that would allow us to cease examining the baggage the term might still carry or take on. 48

I am suggesting that, contra Lopez’s anti-universalism (understood more as colonialism), we might want to press our basic terminology beyond its usual culture-reinforcing channels, avoiding universalism as well as excessive particularism. We would so do to have a basic analytical tool with which to explore real similarities as well as real differences, thereby allowing us to revise our tools even further to create ones more capable of multi-cultural purposes. Although the methodological channels for pursuing this approach are not obvious, I think the language of practice theory provides some basic guidelines. With a practice approach, we would ask about believing, not belief or beliefs. First of all, we could not assume that there is any one way of believing. Then we would ask how believing is constructed in the “semantic system” of particular cultural settings: what inner logic distinguishes it in Dogon or Buddhist cultures from other forms of...
thinking, philosophizing, etc. To explore how believing is constructed would involve laying out the semantic field in which it is locally distinguished -- to whatever extent it may actually be distinguished. This is more complicated than simply determining what is believed and the forms believing takes. In addition, a practice approach would not let us assume that believing is a purely internal state of any kind, nor a personal understanding of ritualized relationships with divine powers.

Practice theory is based on a "critical" methodology, which first demands that we deconstruct the issue to determine exactly why we are interested in it, why it is a problem to be explored or explained. In other words, we must uncover the implicit expectations, the assumptions at stake, the crown jewels in the pocket of a particular view of reality, that is, the value that is endangered if some assumption of our reality is unveiled. Practice theory also expects critical analysis to include an explicit rationale for the usefulness of the rethought term or issue. To analyze modes of believing, therefore, should not yield the same analysis as ritualizing or textualizing, to use some topics I have addressed before with practice theory; nor should it yield the same descriptions as 19th century theories of animism, monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, etc.

De Certeau's work is the oldest and clearest "practice-like" theory around, to date, but provocative resources lie in the ideas of Connerton and Hervieu-Léger on
memory (which attempt to shake up our premises and explore other cultural issues that may be involved in believing), and in some cognitive theories of the socially adaptive value of agency.

I cannot lay out for you today a "practice theory of believing" – much as I wish my work were at that stage. I am confined to a "gadfly" role for today. I do want to suggest, however, that exploration of believing among Greeks and Romans would have to begin as an historical analysis of a non-essentialized lineage of people, groups, stories, texts, and rites both public and private over varying amounts of time and place. Such a study could arguably isolate some particular cultural strategies at work in the different ways Greeks, and Romans, believed — what I would call a strategic way of acting that enabled a certain type of meshing of constructed expectations, understood cosmology, and reinforcing personal experience, a meshing that would accomplish personalized socio-cultural ends, however political or even aesthetic they might be, however incomplete in any particular instance. I suggest that, for starters, choice, commitment, and rejection is not at all what Christian believing it about. That is what Christians like to think they are doing, and while not irrelevant by any means, it is only half the story. Most likely, believing most generally is likely to involve the ways in which contradictions are maintained, not truths affirmed.49

Thank you.
Endnotes

1 This talk is drawn from a book manuscript in progress, parts of which have been given as lectures and also published: Bell, History and Theory, Dec 2006 forthcoming; Bell, “The Chinese Believe in Spirits: Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion,” in Nancy K. Frankenberry, ed., Radical Interpretation in Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002) 100-116. No part of this manuscript can be cited or reproduced without the permission of the author.

2 Gauri Viswanathan, Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief (PUP, 1998), pp. xiii-xvii.

3 W. C. Fields

4 David Hume; Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); W. C. Smith, Belief and History (Charlottesville, NC: University of Virginia, 1977); Slavoj Žižek, On Belief (London: Routledge, 2001).


7 Sam Harris, End of Faith (New York: Norton and Co., 2004). The science writer for the New York Times wrote “The End of Faith articulates the dangers and absurdities of organized religion so fiercely and so fearlessly that I felt relieved as I read it, vindicated, almost personal understood.” Posted on www.sambharris.org, but originally published in the NYT.


9 Daniel C. Dennett, Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon (New York: Viking, 2006).

10 There is a rough fairness, however, in the balance of book marketing, when one compares the critical publications of experts or quasi-experts with the enormous popularity of the extensive world of religious publishing. Truly phenomenal sales have been registered by the Christian paperback series, Left Behind, about what happens when “the Rapture” actually occurs and the saved people are suddenly taken, bodily, to Heaven - taken from the pilot’s seat of an airborne jetliner among other dramatic examples. For all the huffing and puffing about irrational religion, this series has made millions for the authors and widely popularized evangelical teachings about the coming apocalypse. [Left Behind, Tom LeHaye and ...]

11 See Bruno Latour here . . .


13 See Godlove, Terry F., “Saving Belief: On the New Naturalism in Religious Studies” in Frankenberry, ed., Radical Interpretation in Religion, p. 10 (10-24). Although he is arguing from the position that belief is being unfairly belittled in the study of religion, that is, it has problems, Godlove’s essay is a good demonstration of Davidson’s main ideas on belief in regard to some of the debates in the study of religion.

14 Davidson, Donald, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (NY: Oxford 1984), p. 156.


16 Richard Schweder, “Post-Nietzschean Anthropology,” 133.

17 Less developed but also interesting arguments for an anthropology of non-universal, fully particular assumptions and categories is also sketched out by Talal Asad, and Jonathan Z. Smith. Asad, Genealogies of

In a more recent and distinctly new current within the field, the anthropologist Matthew Engelke reminds us that the path breaking anthropologists of the twentieth century, E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner, who both spent years in the field participating in the elaborate ritual life of the Nuer and the Ndembu, respectively, each converted to Catholicism after a few restless years back in the halls of academe. Perhaps after years of close involvement in the highly structured ritual lives of these communities, and then the relative sterility of the rationalized modern technocratic state, Catholicism presented the closest answer to a ritual life with a similarly embracing complexity. (Matthew Engelke, The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on the inner life” Anthropology Today 18, no. 6 [December 2002]: 3-8) Engelke also wonders if the attempt to understand one religion can leave one in a better position to understand another; in this case, Evans-Pritchard’s and Turner’s understanding of the African religions they documented so well might have given them insight and empathy for a religion closer to home. Engelke seems to be innocently raising anew an issue that, in a version only slightly different, marked the birth pains of the degree-granting discipline of the non-theological study of religion, namely, does one have to be a member of a religion to truly understand it. As just stated, the question implies that outsiders engaged in the formal, secular study of religion could not really understand Catholicism or Nuer or any other religion. Today it is easily granted that such a scholar would understand the religion differently, indeed, be engaged in answering very different questions than those of concern to practicing members of the religious community. Through the 1960s, however, this issue involved a lengthy and occasionally contentious process of differentiation as the study of religion carved out a place for itself alongside the other disciplines devoted to religion – theology, scripture, and ministerial studies, among others. (See J Z Smith article [in his folder] and in Relating Religion?)


In another depiction of the fault-line, Susan Harding, an anthropologist, has called the intellectual community to account for its demonization of so-called “fundamentalist” Christians (or conservative evangelicals, as they call themselves), which deliberately created the distance that was then hemmed in by social science. According to Harding, she would remain locked out of their worldview and locked in her own prejudices unless she could let down her professional-personal defenses and accept these believers on their own terms. [See Engelke for Harding, also The Book of Jerry Falwell…] Robert Orsi, a scholar of American folk religion, author of several remarkable studies of immigrant Catholicism, facing similar issues, describes negotiating a major ethical challenge encountered when he went to study the famous snake handlers of Tennessee. [Orsi, Heaven and Hell …] Theirs was a whole culture and he was admitted to it, but did taking them on their own terms mean suspending his previous, and still active, ethical norms? The problem of belief has been at the heart of where different cultures meet with each other with interest while clashing in values, where they meet with a sense of shared humanity only to diverge in shock when particular beliefs contest particular beliefs.

Justin Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God?

Barrett, Boyer ...

See Boyer, for example...

These paradigms are ....

While some of these theorists are not blind to the dilemmas of social science, and even those of the humanities, they can be unusual “cross-over” figures. Noteworthy is this regard: Scott Atran, In Gods We Trust, and Justin Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God? More challenging, the work of Stephen P. Turner, Brains Practices Relativism and Ilkka Pyysiainen, Magic, Miracles and Religion.


Compare Pyysiainen’s comments on phenomenology and his turn to science in Magic, Miracles, and Religion, pp. xiii-xvi, which have a “born-again” style that does not inspire confidence. But confidence in the value of the phenomenological sui generis approach to religion has now fallen by the wayside as questions of origins are once again considered relevant to the project of interpretation.

Important exceptions are W. C. Smith, Donald Lopez (to be discussed), and ...

Needham, Belief, Language and Experience.

Lopez, "Belief".

Lopez, 26-27.

Lopez, p. 28.

Lopez. We can supplement Lopez’s argument with the well known history that the church inherited, among so much else, the dialectical poles of both Greek rationalism and Hebraic revealed monotheism. Tertullian’s cutting inquiry, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” would be echoed less and less in early Christian history as Greek apologias, such as that of Irenaeus, were joined by the Hebraic view of revelation contained in the creeds, which defined orthodoxy just as they diagnosed heresy. After centuries when Greek culture was more or less lost to Europe, it revived (via Islamic scholarship) bringing the back something of the same early debate: for Thomas Aquinas it meant what weight to accord revelation and reason in coming to know God. His answer, which inscribed reason into the heart of the Latin church, was the scholastic theology (and cosmology) lasting in the Roman Catholic Church until the mid-20th century, affirm the power of reason and revelation. But the 16th century, already influenced by the Renaissance, the affirmation of dependence on faith alone, although it ultimately introduced the modern sciences located in study of the book. Yet reason and revelation were both individual apprehensions of the mind and heart; no matter in what the proportion given to each, Christian belief was not an act, not a work, but a state of the mind, with ramifications for the individual soul, not to be fully known by anyone, beyond a confessor, until the Day of Judgment. (unmodified, see note)

Chinese historical literature contains a variety of explicit positions on spirits, although the famous anti-spirit arguments are also admissions of the popularity of the pro-spirit view. But a corresponding discomfort attends the sheer enormity of a generalization, like “the Chinese,” a particularly heterogeneous group outside the early semi-mythical ancestry of the Han people. At least one classic ethnographic study, based just on Taiwan but generalizing to broad conclusions about the unity of Chinese popular religion has been cited as authoritative for three decades. Now, wider fieldwork can, unfortunately, deflate the author’s neat claims. It seems that when regional practices are seriously analyzed, the variety is so great that there is no obvious coherency whereby the cosmos reflects social categories, or vice versa. The supposed unity of “the Chinese” at the dynamic level of folk culture is not something that can be assumed. More subtle issues are captured in a lovely essay by the early 20th century sociologist, Fei Xiaotung, entitled “A World without Ghosts.” Fei Xiaotung describes growing up in a large house with closed-off wings, all said to be populated by an endless number of ancestral ghosts. He shivered and shook at times, but in retrospect it was a closely populated world that made home a large and interesting community of which he felt a part. Fei compares such a boyhood to the American model of growing up under the influence of comic books about an endless stream of superheroes. How these two mindsets could not result in very different people and cultures, he asks: but for all the confidence in facing the future instilled in the American child, Fei concludes he would not trade his floating spectral family and quieter, subsumed individuality. Now, to what extent can we assume that Fei, writing as a sociologist so many years removed from boyhood, believes in spirits? The essay form, the simple but insightful comparison, his tender nostalgia—they all suggest that his beliefs were culturally automatic and unquestioned at one time, but the worldly professional is not the boy; he became quite self-conscious and distant in regard to believing it all. Do the Chinese believe in spirits only when they are young? When they are older, some may but others do not? Still my first example demonstrated that to say “the Chinese believe ...” about anything can be an entertaining but hardly scholarly generalization.

Christine Joost-Gaugier, Measuring Heaven: Pythagoras and His Influence on Thought and Art in Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Ithaca: Cornell, 2006)
Believing Talk, Oxford 3
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38 See the review article by Jeremy Zwolliing, entitled “The Fictions of Biblical History,” in History and Theory 39, vol. 1 (February 2000): 117-141, which begins with Thompson’s The Myth Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel, but goes on to discuss the work of Mieke Bal and Daniel Boyarin among others.

39 de Certeau, “What Do We Do When We Believe”

40 de Certeau 177-179

41 de Certeau

42 It is easy to recognize that people who have never been exposed to any worldview but that of their own isolated culture probably do not generally hold the sense of coexistence in the world with their deities that one can find in a worldly sage like Augustine of Hippo, who was aware of many ways of looking at a more or less meaningful universe. Indeed, the first type of society offers its people limited options, nothing more than greater or lesser involvement in the various cultic activities that are not mandated, as initiations or ancestral rites might be. The more cosmopolitan society provides many more and dramatic distinct options, such as those faced by Augustine, who, according to his not totally reliable Confessions, saw two worlds, two cosmologies, fundamentally opposed to each other, demanding that he choose. In fact he had chosen many times, but the demand for a choice never left his purview. He would make a melodramatic choice to believe something specific, to turn from the cultural tradition of Terence and Virgil, to the biblical Christ of the North African Christianity of his day. His was a choice to engage in a new and specific set of relationships with the divine that brought a set of responsibilities accompanied generated by a very human community to which he was now tied. Mick McCarthy paper.

43 Veyne, chapter

44 Elizabeth Eisenstein, The Printing Press as an Agent of Change (Chicago, 19 _ ), foreskin account. Eisenstein’s detailed explanation of the rise and ramifications of printing in Europe chronicles its association with the growth of a monastic industry advertising relics. Pilgrimage grew as people read, or heard from those who did, about these marvels and their purported cures, giving rise to the hospices run by the monasteries to house the wayfaring pilgrim and the wealthy cathedrals that grew up at the end off their routes. The relics and the hospices that went with them were important sources of income, not only enabling a monastery to build itself a great cathedral but also to undertake the copying of manuscripts, an activity so important for the lifeblood of Christian culture and even the reappearance of Greek. So the printing of simple advertising circulars depicting the relics and miracles to be had at any particular place was among the immediate uses for the new technology. Yet, Eisenstein contains the account of one vexed male pilgrim, complaining, after having gone to visit a seventh reliquary displaying the foreskin of Jesus. Like Pausanius, he was struck by doubt. But rather than grant a kernel of truth, or hope, to any one of them, he seems to have ditched his previous piety to sarcastically question the whole business. Eisenstein’s example describes the circulation of people around Europe and the holy land, the circulation of texts that encouraged them and then described their experiences, presenting them with a variety of competing holy items, even competing notions of holiness. Perhaps not many were as disposed to cynicism as the writer of the complaint about a few too many foreskins; they may simply have refused to select, continuing to put their hope in one relic after another. But surely economic limits and the ability of some displays and stories to exert their influence would make choices inevitable—and some monasteries died while others prospered into major centers. In any case, plural options, or choices, could induce the faithful to accept much in the name of believing or reject it all for more critical stances. The diversity that Greek and Roman culture presented, especially the alternatives presented to Jews or Christians should they travel through Rome or beyond, forced choices on people at every turn. CHECK

45 Christianity itself was never so homogenous that it could represent a unified modality or matrix, without variations in every possible component. The Christian matrix lived within the religion as well, as the Inquisition itself too clearly reminds us. Lopez’s presentation of the role of the Inquisition in defining the nature of belief represents a very historically defined moment in church history and one that sounds like a conceptual prelude to the Reformation. In the early Christian communities, we know that the nature of belief as well as the exact focus of belief were very much up for debate. What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem, asked Tertullian; Origen took up the same question roughly a century later. But a century after Origen, he was a declared heretic as the church came to define more clearly its place in a Greco-Roman empire, even if it
fought off all Gnostic rationalizations of the particular divine-human revelation that Jesus Christ was thought
to represent. The matrix is assembled slowly, and as it did, more corners and centers of Christendom
experienced fewer choices or conversions, the rejections mere pro forma condemnations of distant heretics and
pagans.

...that the Greeks. Yes, the polemics the odd
need to go; we may still find ourselves caught, like an oversized fish, in yet another fine netting of cu'tural
romantic having it both ways, or Veyne’s generative classicism of myth to analysis, but all truths — the
assumptions. But for the post-colonial anti-Christian dilemma that Lopez would leave us in, or de Certeau’s
ideology defined to seize goods and land; or a...
the well trodden paths and the reasons to look to another route where the adventuresome will find different questions to ask...
Berkeley Institute of Buddhist Studies (October 5, 2006)

I prepared the bulk of this paper for a group of Oxford-Princeton classicists, who are offering an annual seminar, the topic this time being the issue of faith (or belief) in the ancient world. In ten pages I am leaving out, I take them on a very quick tour of the “problem of belief” as it have been defined in several key disciplines in the humanities and social sciences -- notably philosophy, anthropology, cognitive theory, and my own field, the history of religions. That is the first section. I want to pick up here, with some adaptations for a Buddhalogical audience, with the specific issue so important to the study of religion, namely, the universality or particularity of what we mean by belief.

In other words, can we say that all people believe in religious entities? Can we describe all religious ideas as beliefs, or might “believing” imply a very specific type of conscious or unconscious relationship to particular entities? The ethnographic evidence for going in all these directions is mixed. In 1972 Rodney Needham noted the expedient ease with which many ethnographers blithely claimed that such and such people believe in this and that god or gods, comfortable with the assumption that the English verb “to believe” captured the particular religious sensibilities of a very different culture. Of course, a universal assumption about the know-ability of other peoples and their cultures has been basic to anthropology. Similarly, a fundamental assumption about the unity of
believing as a phenomenon has supported the whole enterprise of comparative religions and most “world religions” textbooks. But it may also be responsible for much of what is unsatisfactory with such projects as well.

In contrast to those who found belief everywhere, Needham pointed out the close attention to local terms first seen in Evans-Pritchard’s study of the Nuer and their theology. Needham himself examined the indigenous terms for anything roughly comparable to belief in Navaho religion, Hinduism, the dialects of the Philippines, and the religious ideas of the Penan of Borneo. The exercise gave evidence of “the bewildering variety of senses attaching to words … indifferently translated by the English ‘believe’.”

Most recently, the Buddhologist Donald Lopez launched a very targeted attack on the assumption of universality in our notion of belief. He argues that the term has a clear historical locus in the matrix of meanings forged by early Christianity and developed in the course of Christian history as the Church sought to define theological orthodoxy and institutional jurisdiction. It was in the Inquisition, Lopez suggests that belief acquired its current distinctive gloss, namely, that outward action is an inadequate indication of the views one harbors deep within the heart. Only torture, if needed, can reveal those sentiments and elicit true repentance.

Lopez uses a dramatic narrative, the story of Peter of Verona, a 13th century preacher, who was asked by Pope Gregory IX to launch an Inquisition against the
Gnostic heresy of the Cathars (or Albigensians). It was the Inquisition, Lopez notes, that institutionalized testing a person’s true beliefs and defined the errors and punishments associated with the sin of heresy against the church. But the Inquisition was also deeply involved in the confiscation of property, which added to the local zeal of the movement, and in the struggle for political control of a great deal of southern France being waged between the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. Peter of Verona was eventually deemed a martyr; his story has it that as he was dying from stab wounds, he inscribed the credo, the beginning of the orthodox creed, on the ground with his own blood. With a tad less evidence than one might want for a very complicated chapter in medieval history, the story of Peter and subsequent Inquisitions lets Lopez conclude that Christianity, in this period at least, distinguished belief not by what a person said, but by “the invisible content of the mind.” Since the means for identifying believers from non-believers gave great power to the one deciding who had what in their hearts, Lopez pushes this conclusion further: the idea of belief “is neither natural nor universal. It might be described as an ideology, an idea that arises from a specific set of material interests.”

Lopez gives a second example describing the 1881 Buddhist Catechism with which Colonel Henry Steele Olcott sought to bring Singhalese Buddhism into the modern world. In Olcott’s understanding, Buddhism was a religion and, therefore, a system of beliefs. So he was shocked by how poorly the pious monks of Sri
Lanka could recite back to him the basic beliefs that the translated textual sources
had taught so well to Olcott. He was especially concerned that Buddhists be able to
hold off the growing influence of Christian missionaries destroying the indigenous
culture. Lopez argues that the "ideology of belief," assumed by Olcott to be the
universal nature of religion, was rooted in nothing more than the assumptions of
Christian history. 34

Although Lopez's argument for the cultural particularism of belief is a
striking one, I cannot fully agree with his conclusion. Nonetheless, in a 2002
publication I presented data that indirectly supports a similar position. Arguing
with the frequently quoted formula that "the Chinese believe in spirits," I noted
how reality got more complicated the closer one came to any particular situation. 35

Chinese historical literature contains a variety of explicit positions on spirits,
although the famous anti-spirit arguments are also admissions of the popularity of
the pro-spirit view. But a corresponding discomfort attends the sheer enormity of a
generalization like "the Chinese," a particularly heterogeneous group outside the
early, semi-mythical ancestry of the Han people. At least one classic ethnographic
study, based just in Taiwan but generalizing to broad conclusions about the unity
of Chinese popular religion, has been cited as authoritative for three decades. Yet
wider fieldwork can now, unfortunately, deflate the author's long accepted
claims. 36 It seems that when regional practices are seriously analyzed, the variety is
so great that there is no obvious cultural coherence whereby the cosmos reflects
social categories, and vice versa.\(^{37}\) The supposed unity of "the Chinese" at the
dynamic level of folk culture is not something that can be assumed.

More subtle issues are captured in a lovely essay by the early 20\(^{th}\) century
sociologist, Fei Xiaotung, entitled "A World without Ghosts."\(^{38}\) Fei Xiaotung
describes growing up in a large house with closed-off wings, all said to be
populated by an endless number of ancestral ghosts. He shivered and shook at
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told, to say "the Chinese believe …" in any particular thing can be an entertaining
but hardly scholarly generalization.
III Choice

My arguments generally supported those of Lopez when he countered the assumed “universality” of belief by pointing to the cultural particularity of the concept’s origins. But the main issue for Lopez, convinced that belief originated in the matrix of Christianity, was the onslaught of a foreign and ideological category that obfuscated the real dynamics of local Singhalese Buddhism. Here, I think, Lopez’s analysis should be challenged in two ways.

First, does the concept of belief that we have today, which went out to conquer the world in the 1st century and again in the 16th, really originate in Christianity? Paul Veyne’s study of belief among the ancient Greeks complicates the picture, as does a new study of Pythagoras and his cult/legacy, and several studies of 1st century BC/AD Judaism. The more we learn about what Lopez called the Christian matrix of belief and how it fitted into the full historical mosaic of social forces at the time of its supposed creation, the less originality we can automatically ascribe to this very successful religion.

Second, in his monograph Lopez is historical only about this particular East-West colonial encounter. But we know he does not mean to imply that Singhalese culture was free of colonizing influences until Olcott arrived. The British were not the first Europeans in Sir Lanka, not by far; and Europeans were not the first to conquer and colonize the island. In other words, the island had been swept by the
winds of outside cultural influence for several millennia. Lopez would also agree that Sri Lankans had the creative right to appropriate certain colonial categories, such as the idea of beliefs that one knows by heart (note the phrase and what rote memorization has meant in our culture). In fact, the forces represented by Olcott were incredibly successful and great parts of the world today increasingly understand themselves in terms of religious movements involving choice, conversion, and commitment – all implicit in Lopez’s Western notion of belief. Now the three fastest growing religions are Catholicism, Islam and Christian evangelicalism, so belief is not a category we can dismiss for its checkered past in the hands of papal Inquisitors or colonial catechists. Explorations of the ways in which belief is now working in a mostly post-colonial world would undoubtedly be quite interesting.

[Story of UCLA Buddhologist; ordained in Yi Fo Sheng (Theravada)?]

In addition to Lopez’s chapter on belief, two short studies by Michel de Certeau are also very provocative for rethinking the issue of belief. De Certeau leaves me wondering if most modern European languages do not allow sufficient looseness to the idea of belief to justify the very general sense in which we might interpret the term -- as the understanding that more often than not human beings think of themselves as coexisting in the cosmos with other invisible beings, usually sacred or superhuman, and this coexistence involves certain interactions with them. De Certeau himself assumes a universality to belief in his analysis of
believing sets up a temporally defined contractual relationship, marked by the investment of one party with the clear sense of something eventually due in return (perhaps a version of Mauss’s theory of the gift). Yet as a sociologist of modern industrial society, he also discusses how little we know, or can ever know, about belief. It is a wary modern conclusion, based on the popular view, he suggests, that for us now there are “too many things to believe and not enough credibility to go around.” De Certeau actually seems to dip in and out of two understandings of belief, ones that would be familiar to Needham. In one line of analysis he cleverly describes “beliefs” as what we have left when we no longer believe. Yet in pointing to that “fallen,” post-indigenous state in which cultural options become available, de Certeau assumes a disruptive change in some automatic cultural moment, a change that comes by offering a degree of choice about what to believe or how much to believe it. Whenever the cultural status quo is rocked by such change, beliefs are apt to be formulated more clearly or fully. They may even be compared, new with old, if only to attempt to dismiss the influence of a visiting trader, anthropologist, or missionary. So, at times, de Certeau seems to imply the existence of an innocent, pre-modern, unself-conscious mode of transaction with the gods, who are not formulated in concepts any more than they need to be. Stories, titles, distinctive ritual greetings or offerings – these are the ways such innocents believe; not in reasoned concepts. Only when the missionaries arrive, the Phoenicians land, the Jews conquer Canaan, or cultures clash and are presented
with choices. These, to justify the break from the old, must be accompanied by an extra show of personal commitment. Then we are no longer dealing with the gods; we are dealing with our beliefs.  

IV. Rejection

In contrast to Lopez and de Certeau, Paul Veyne does not make any universal/particular-style arguments; he uses the more subtle, and obscure, language of “modalities” of belief. He clearly describes one modality that comes into being when the option of doubt opens up a new type of choice, along with the unprecedented social position of being one in a position to doubt. Veyne describes Pausanius, laboring over his compilation of the stories of local gods, deciding that a “kernel of truth” must reside in the many redundant tales he had amassed. Herodotus reported what many different people had told him with the amused distance of one not closely attached to a particular version – another modality of belief, write Veyne. Thucydides researched particular types of the stories and retold one clear narrative of the Peloponnesian war -- in his way, as the most reliable version he could determine. This is not the triumph of logos over mythos, Veyne suggests, but the development of mythos, history, and then criticism—all modalities of belief, modalities of truth.

Several elements come together in Veyne’s account that will not be easily undone in Western culture. First, cultural pluralism -- in the plethora of local tales
that Pausanius gathers, in the culturally wider answers to the curiosity of Herodotus, then in the different accounts compared and analyzed by Thucydides. Secondly, Veyne outlines a process of comparison and choice -- due to the pluralism that he stumbled upon, Pausanius chose to assume a so-called “historical kernel” of truth in all the myths, while entertaining a new type of doubt about the details, especially the repetitive mythic themes. It is a familiar modality of both believing and doubting. At the other extreme, Thucydides chose to leave out the fantastic altogether in favor of a distinctly non-mythic realism that demonstrates an internal logic within the narration, further defining *mythos* as the incredible and doubtful, irrelevant to the type of critical history in which *he* now believed and wrote – as another modality of belief.**15**

By the time Christianity developed in the long simmering melting pot of the Mediterranean world, if you got around a bit beyond your own village, your beliefs would identify and locate you; if you got around a lot more, they were apt to taken on as a personal choice, whether it was Mithraism, a particular Roman god, the new Christ in any of the various versions of his significance, or some sect of Jewish nationalism. When personal choice entered the picture, believing was always came to be seen as a conversion away from the rule of reason, which is, of course, simply the rule of the familiar, the status quo, common sense; such choices were an acceptance of the incredible, a remaking of one’s old identity by the choosing as well as by what was chosen. A set of beliefs to which one orally (and
ritually) testified became the crux of being Christian, or a follower of Mithra, a devotee of Jupiter, and so on. Textual culture, seen in the early efforts of Pausanius through Thucydides, could make its own claims as a medium of critical thought, that is, develop its own modalities of belief and doubt. The gathering together of a **canonical** set of scriptures, which was the way so many Christianities were weeded out, with the resulting texts attributed to people who were reputed witnesses, made the texts a source of authority for the central message—revelation of Christ. But oral and public recitation of the **credo** made one a Christian.46 To keep working Veyne’s generous term, further modalities of belief would open up between scriptural testimony and the institutionalization of apostolic succession that claimed the authority to guarantee them, and ripen into great divide of the 15th century Reformation.

It seems correct to me, just as Lopez has argued, that early Christianity pulled together many influences to imbue the activity of believing with a particular constellation of meanings. Like every winner on the historical stage, Christianity defined the parameters of believing for so much subsequent European history, although some other local models were able to hang on in places. Within the Christian modality, belief was built on individual choice and, as such, could always vie with the traditions of tribe, city, or family: choice, conversion, commitment, with ‘doubt of the other’ firming up into ‘rejection’ (even repulsion) of all else. Ritualized early on in the catechumenate, the succession of creeds articulated by
the early churches continued to ritualize entrance of individuals into the rightful house of Christ with the oral profession of faith.

Lopez mentions the feature of rejection in passing; but I think he is very right to note this feature of the Christian model. It’s type of choice always meant a concomitant rejection: I believe in this, not that; I am a Christian, not a Roman, not a Jew, ideally, not master nor slave, male nor female. Being Christian was meant as the all-encompassing signifier. Indeed, after so many centuries of this style, modern Christians have had to learn how commitment and rejection can relax into personal choice (perhaps some doubt of others) merely in order for social tolerance to become conceivable.

V. Believing

Yet Lopez’s analysis raises some questions.

First, is Christianity really the model of believing in the many of cultures of Europe as well its colonial legatees? Has the model remained an historically fixed matrix? And -- can a certain set of Christian assumptions indelibly shape our sense of the term in all the European languages for all time? Christians certainly fitted the traditions of the Jews, Muslims and various pagans into their own models, and what did not fit was so other it was hard to even see. Lopez is undoubtedly correct in his characterization of the substance of that model or modality at many points in our history, but how homogeneous must the model be over time to
include recent history and future trajectories, in all the main languages of study?
For example, I have known Catholic institutions for a good part of my life, in one connection or another, and I know that up close Roman Catholic believing has changed dramatically in a mere half century in most places in America and Europe. This has been the subject of much analysis by Catholics and a few sociologists. I think the question of homogeneity does not only impact how we see the history of the West, and Christianity itself, it also impacts how we evaluate the probable origins of the modality. 47 Were they really so Christian?

Second, an easy contrast to the religious matrix of choice, conversion, commitment and rejection would be the religious practices of the primarily oral cultures of the indigenous peoples Europeans encountered – as we even assume them to be today, of course. Yet the somewhat buried assumption that such peoples were all sufficiently isolated to afforded no real socio-cultural choices to individuals until the Christian missionary arrived is probably overstated and in danger of propagating, under the table, so to speak, more of a Christian-centered understanding of history. As an assumption, the theoretical isolation and lack of choice of indigenous peoples probably depends greatly on the Protestant misunderstanding of orality itself as inherently primitive, a view that made it very difficult for the earliest ethnographers to even refer to indigenous spiritualities as "religion" (the continuities across cultures implied by the term religion were not at first particularly appreciated by European religious and academic authorities).
are learning that indigenous cultures in the past were rarely so isolated or marked by consensus that the individual had no choices to make, such as -- trading further afar, joining the cults that would arise particularly at times of stress that split larger communities into factions with different histories, absorbing more quickly the influence of conquering tribes whose enlarged kingdoms would evolve more complex religious patterns, or simply the personal choice to take a bigger role in the ceremonial life of the community -- like the blinded hunter, Ogotemmeli, who gradually revealed Dogon religious ideas to Marcel Griaule, who in turn amazed Europe with their sophistication. [Griaule's earliest books called these ideas African philosophy; it was only years later that the Dogon elders decided to tell him the real story]. No matter how small and isolated, everyone in a community would not be involved with their spirits and cultural lore to the same degree or in the same way. This is not to deny that, based on some very thorough ethnographies, some communities appear to engage in whole-sale community rejections of some outside influences, such as the missionaries, in favor of their own traditions. But I do challenge the uniqueness of the “choice and conversion of the individual” model.

These are not technical quibbles aimed just at Lopez; I think they inherently challenge the degree of “particularity” to which we think we can resort when jettisoning master narratives and grand universalities. If the Christian model of belief described by Lopez really has older roots and many varietals, and oral
cultures do not prevent the presence of some of the components of this so-called Christian model, then an even more central – methodological -- question looms. Is the historical freight of the notion of belief in the European world so set and insurmountable that the term cannot be used – with care and imagination -- to describe other ways of believing? To say it cannot could suggest that other cultures do not believe in any like the sense of the term. Do we really want to be so particular that we are thrown back on to another form of ethnocentrism?

I do not think that stretching our term belief to attempt to describe very differently constructed relationships with the supernatural – shared ritual relations ones or quite personal psychological ones – is demanded by the hermeneutics of suspicion that drives a good post-modernist historian. And it goes without saying that neither can I imagine any usage that would allow us to cease examining the baggage the term might still carry, or take on.

In Lopez’s quickly drawn example, late 19th century Sinhalese Buddhism acts as a type of polar opposite to Christianity. In this sketch, Theravada Buddhism is not built around beliefs, and certainly not the confessional, doctrinal or theological exploration of them; it is a practice, entirely moral at first, intent on distinct forms of physical and mental self-restraint at the more demanding level of the monk, with the explicit goals of a better rebirth and eventual transcendence (to use a Western term). Of course, the first Buddhists were probably converts of a sort; they chose commitment to a different path, perhaps not rejecting others so
much as prioritizing the options, and maybe the differences were minor. But choice is exercised repeatedly in the stories of Buddhism.

As you may know, the questions “do Buddhists believe?” evokes the very old, and tired, question once endemic to comparative and world religion enterprises as to whether Buddhism could properly be called a religion or not. This tempest in a teapot hails from the days when Buddhist practice was less defining of the tradition to Westerners than Buddhist scriptural teachings; clearly, Buddhism violated most of the definitional "norms" that religions believe in a transcendent being or benign force corresponding to a type of eternal soul. Ninian Smart, among others, was convinced that if we let Buddhism in to the 'religion' category, and he did (it certainly meant textbooks sold better), then why not communism, that other great example of a soul-less ideology qua religion. So his cold war textbooks, and a few others, usually did include some discussion of communism and treated Buddhism as a religion with odd parameters – until it got to Mahayana of course.

I am, of course, simply suggesting, contra Lopez, that we might want to press our basic terminology beyond its usual culture-reinforcing channels, avoiding universalism as well as excessive particularism, but giving us a tool with which to explore real similarities as well as real difference among historical ways of being; so doing helps to revise our categories even further into ones more capable of multi-cultural purposes. Still, the methodological channels for pursuing this approach are not obvious, though I think we have in the language of practice
theory so basic guidelines. Taking a practice approach, we would ask about believing, not belief or beliefs; we would ask how believing is constructed, with what imagery that distinguishes it in Dogon or Buddhist culture from other forms of thinking, philosophizing, etc. To explore how believing is constructed would involve laying out the semantic field in which it is distinguished, to whatever extent it may be distinguished. This is more complicated than simply determining what is believed and the forms believing takes. From the start we could not assume that there was any one way of believing, but if a comparable mode of religiosity existed, there would be a spectrum of distinguished forms or positions. In addition, I should add, it would be central to a practice approach to make sure that believing was not assumed to be a purely internal state, personal understanding of the cosmos, a private relationship that when put into words already succumbed to a relatively alien medium. [That has been the reigning assumption about belief, undergirding any description of modality. In fact, of course, nothing that is assumed to be a purely personal reality is ever actually dealt with as such or even formally studied as such. Think of Freudian theory, its theory of the self and its practice of treating, that in, reaching into, the self.]

Practice theory is also based on the notion of a critical methodology, which first demands that we deconstruct the so-called issue to determine exactly why we are interested in it; in other words, we must uncover the implicit expectations, the assumptions at stake, the crown jewels in the pocket of a particular view of reality,
that is, the value that is endangered if some aspect of our assumed reality proves to be less absolute. Practice theory also demands that the resulting analysis illuminate real applications inadequately by earlier methods. That is, it expects the critical analysis to include an explicit rationale for the usefulness of the rethought term or issue. To analyze modes of believing should not yield the same analysis as ritualizing, or textualizing, to use some topics I have addressed before with practice theory; nor should it yield the same descriptions as 19th century theories of animism, monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, etc. Though I think those analyses paved the way for our approach to believing to leave behind some of the assumptions of the Christian culture is which the study of religion arose.

De Certeau's work is the oldest and clearest practice-like theory around, to date, but provocative resources lie in the ideas of Connerton and Hervieu-Léger on memory (which attempt to shake up our premises and explore other cultural issues that may be involved in believing), and there are also resources in some cognitive theories of the socially adaptive value of agency. I cannot lay out for you today a "practice theory of believing" - much as I wish my work was at that stage. I am confined to a more "gadfly" role for now. I do want to suggest, however, that exploration of believing among Christians - or the Greeks and Romans - would have to begin as a historical analysis of a non-essentialized lineage of people, each a group, a family, a society, and books over varying amounts of time and place. Such a study could arguably isolate some particular cultural strategies at work in the way a people have thought and acted in the past. However, I do not believe that we can leave behind some of the assumptions of the Christian culture is which the study of religion arose.

Thus, I am confined to a more "gadfly" role for now. I do want to suggest, however, that exploration of believing among Buddhists - or the Greeks and Romans - would have to begin as a historical analysis of a non-essentialized lineage of people, each a group, a family, a society, and books over varying amounts of time and place. Such a study could arguably isolate some particular cultural strategies at work in the way a people have thought and acted in the past. However, I do not believe that we can leave behind some of the assumptions of the Christian culture is which the study of religion arose.
Buddhist or a Greek believed, what I would call a strategic way of acting that enabled a certain type of meshing of constructed expectations, understood cosmology, and reinforcing personal experience – one that would accomplish personalized socio-cultural ends, however political or aesthetic they might be deemed to be, however incomplete in any particular instance. I would suggest that choice, commitment, and rejection is not at all what Christian believing it about; that is what it wants one to think it is doing, not what it is really doing. Probably believing is more likely to be a way in which contradictions are maintained, not truths affirmed.

In the case of Buddhist studies in particular, scholars have been very respectful of the scriptural assumptions, and monastic disclaimers in the face of missionary onslaughts. Even the disproven theories of the strategy behind Chinese popular religious beliefs are far more concrete than anything I have ever read for Buddhism. In effect, we have never really subjected Buddhism to such an analysis of Buddhist believing, even though I have seen Thai Buddhist catechisms, joined Buddhist chants for world peace, and marveled at medieval art depicting the role of the bodhisattva who makes itself available to be entreated by a devotee. Is this believing? I really want to ask you. On one level of course, on another level why should it be, on yet another level, what is going on? What do the Buddhologists say?

Thank you.
To suggest an answer would be to suggest what is distinctive about the modality of believing that the Greeks evinced toward their gods before too much critical analysis had piled up as a cultural option and all the stories were gathered to be revered as myths. Whatever it was earlier and later, it was different from believing among the Romans, whose mythic narrative was standardized earlier on and remained a bit separate from many activities of cultic worship.

The "problem of belief" may be something different in every disciplinary field, given their particular histories of research and research materials. But for the study of religion, the problem of belief is clearly a meaningless dead end. What can we ever say about belief in general? We can talk about beliefs, which are many, all had or held in different ways. Like any discipline, including Shweder's fault-lined anthropology, we are concerned with the limits of what we know, the differences that we see and imagine, as well as the commonalities that we cannot help but assume. This means that religious studies must focus on the practice of believing, on how people believe, construct believing relationships... Through critical analysis we must leave the Christian baggage behind, which it can do only when we know it, as best we can at this point in history, but committed to continually plumbing the depths. Looking at the practice of believing, relativizing believing, emphasizing the activities rather than a hypothetical mindset, may enable us to do this.

While is it another paper to lay out a full analysis of what it means to focus on the practice of believing. I think the simple change in wording opens the imagination to allow new and different questions. It may not take us as far as we need to go: we may still find ourselves caught, like an oversize fish, in yet another fine netting of cultural assumptions. But for the post-colonial anti-Christian dilemma that Lopez would leave us in, or de Certeau's romantic having it both ways, or Veyne's generative classicism of myth to analysis, but all truths – these do not
allow us to go further afield, they beach us on dry land. They confine us to an impossibility, or a
Christian ideology defined to seize goods and land; or a naïve mythic truth compared to the
critical truth, all the gift of the Greeks. Yes, the Greeks became self-conscious about their gods.
but so did the Romans while being as bound to them as to the city and their history and their
fortunes: but a far traveled people, there was always an odd element of doubt. The special
qualities of believing for the Greeks and the Romans -- that is something this seminar will be
addressing. I simply hope to have sketched out enough to indicate the main issues behind the
well trodden paths and the reasons to look to another route where the adventuresome will find
different questions to ask...

Thank you.
Endnotes

1 This talk is drawn from a book manuscript in progress, parts of which have been given as lectures and also published: Bell, History and Theory, Dec 2006 forthcoming; Bell, “The Chinese Believe in Spirits: Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion,” in Nancy K. Frankenberry, ed., Radical Interpretation in Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002) 100-116. No part of this manuscript can be cited or reproduced without the permission of the author.

2 Gauri Viswanathan, Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief (PUP, 1998), pp. xiii-xvii.

3 W. C. Fields

4 David Hume; Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); W. C. Smith, Belief and History (Charlottesville, NC: University of Virginia, 1977); Slavoj Žižek, On Belief (London: Routledge, 2001).


6 Wendy Kaminer’s Sleeping with Terrestrials: the Rise of Irrationalism and the Perils of Piety (New York: Pantheon, 1999).

7 Sam Harris, End of Faith (New York: Norton and Co., 2004). The science writer for the New York Times wrote “‘The End of Faith’ articulates the dangers and absurdities of organized religion so fiercely and so fearlessly that I felt relieved as I read it, vindicated, almost personally understood.” Posted on www.samharris.org, but originally published in the NYT.


9 Daniel C. Dennett, Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon (New York: Viking, 2006).

10 There is a rough fairness, however, in the balance of book marketing, when one compares the critical publications of experts or quasi-experts with the enormous popularity of the extensive world of religious publishing. Truly phenomenal sales have been registered by the Christian paperback series, Left Behind, about what happens when “the Rapture” actually occurs and the saved people are suddenly taken, bodily, to Heaven - taken from the pilot’s seat of an airborne jetliner among other dramatic examples. For all the huffing and puffing about irrational religion, this series has made millions for the authors and widely popularized evangelical teachings about the coming apocalypse. [Left Behind, Tom LeHaye and ...]


12 See Godlove, Terry F., “Saving Belief: On the New Naturalism in Religious Studies” in Frankenberry, ed., Radical Interpretation in Religion, p. 10 (10-24). Although he is arguing from the position that belief is being unfairly belittled in the study of religion, that is, it has problems, Godlove’s essay is a good demonstration of Davidson’s main ideas on belief in regard to some of the debates in the study of religion.


16 Less developed but also interesting arguments for an anthropology of non-universal, fully particular assumptions and categories is also sketched out by Talal Asad, and Jonathan Z. Smith. Asad, Genealogies of

In a more recent and distinctly new current within the field, the anthropologist Matthew Engelke reminds us that the path breaking anthropologists of the twentieth century, E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner, who both spent years in the field participating in the elaborate ritual life of the Nuer and the Ndembu, respectively, each converted to Catholicism after a few restless years back in the halls of academe. Perhaps after years of close involvement in the highly structured ritual lives of these communities, and then the relative sterility of the rationalized modern technocratic state, Catholicism presented the closest answer to a ritual life with a similarly embracing complexity. (Matthew Engelke, The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on “the inner life” Anthropology Today 18, no. 6 [December 2002]: 3-8) Engelke also wonders if the attempt to understand one religion can leave one in a better position to understand another; in this case, Evans-Pritchard’s and Turner’s understanding of the African religions they documented so well might have given them insight and empathy for a religion closer to home. Engelke seems to be innocently raising anew an issue that, in a version only slightly different, marked the birth pains of the degree-granting discipline of the non-theological study of religion, namely, does one have to be a member of a religion to truly understand it. As just stated, the question implies that outsiders engaged in the formal, secular study of religion could not really understand Catholicism or Nuer or any other religion. Today it is easily granted that such a scholar would understand the religion differently, indeed, be engaged in answering very different questions than those of concern to practicing members of the religious community. Through the 1960s, however, this issue involved a lengthy and occasionally contentious process of differentiation as the study of religion carved out a place for itself alongside the other disciplines devoted to religion – theology, scripture, and ministerial studies, among others. (See J Z Smith article [in his folder] and in Relating Religion?)


In another depiction of the fault-line, Susan Harding, an anthropologist, has called the intellectual community to account for its demonization of so-called “fundamentalist” Christians (or conservative evangelicals, as they call themselves), which deliberately created the distance that was then bemoaned by social science. According to Harding, she would remain locked out of their worldview and locked in her own prejudices unless she could let down her professional-personal defenses and accept these believers on their own terms. [See Engelke for Harding, also The Book of Jerry Falwell…] Robert Orsi, a scholar of American folk religion, author of several remarkable studies of immigrant Catholicism, facing similar issues, describes negotiating a major ethical challenge encountered when he went to study the famous snake handlers of Tennessee. [Orsi, Heaven and Hell …] Theirs was a whole culture and he was admitted to it, but did taking them on their own terms mean suspending his previous, and still active, ethical norms? The problem of belief has been at the heart of where different cultures meet with each other with interest while clashing in value, where they meet with a sense of shared humanity only to diverge in shock when particular beliefs contest particular beliefs.

Justin Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God?

These paradigms are …

While some of these theorists are not blind to the dilemmas of social science, and even those of the humanities, they can be unusual “cross-over” figures. Noteworthy is this regard: Scott Atran, In Gods We Trust, and Justin Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God? More challenging, the work of Stephen P. Turner, Brains / Practices / Relativism and Ilkka Pyysiäinen, Magic, Miracles and Religion.


Compare Pyysiäinen’s comments on phenomenology and his turn to science in Magic, Miracles, and Religion, pp. xiii-xvi, which have a “born-again” style that does not inspire confidence in his objectivity.

But this stance has now fallen by the wayside as questions of origins became irrelevant to the project of interpretation.

See the 2005 second edition as well, ed. Lindsay Jones. J. Z. Smith dates the field to the 1960s, see “Religious Studies: Whither (wither) and Why?" Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 7, no. 4 (1995): 407-414. W. C. Smith has consistently addressed belief (see …). Also the otherwise dated Hastings'
Important exceptions are W. C. Smith, Donald Lopez (to be discussed), and challenges by Donald Wiebe, etc...

Needham, *Belief, Language and Experience.*

Lopez, "Belief".

Lopez. 26-27.

Lopez, p. 28.

Lopez. We can supplement Lopez’s argument with the well known history that the church inherited, among so much else, the dialectical poles of both Greek rationalism and Hebraic revealed monotheism. Tertullian’s cutting inquiry, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” would be echoed less and less in early Christian history as Greek apologias, such as that of Irenaeus, were joined by the Hebraic view of revelation contained in the creeds, which defined orthodoxy just as they diagnosed heresy. After centuries when Greek culture was more or less lost to Europe, it revived (via Islamic scholarship) bringing back something of the same early debate: for Thomas Aquinas it meant what weight to accord revelation and reason in coming to know God. His answer, which inscribed reason into the heart of the Latin church, was the scholastic theology (and cosmology) lasted in the Roman Catholic Church until the mid-20th century, affirm the power of reason and revelation. But the 16th century, already influenced by the Renaissance, the affirmation of dependence on faith alone, although it ultimately introduced the modern sciences located in study of the book. Yet reason and revelation were both individual apprehensions of the mind and heart; no matter in what the proportion given to each, Christian belief was not an act, not a work, but a state of the mind, with ramifications for the individual soul, not to be fully known by anyone, beyond a confessor, until the Day of Judgment. (unmodified, see notes)


As an example I cited a famous ethnographic study by Arthur Wolf (“Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors...” See Bell, in Fenn, ed. *Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*) that revealed different grades of spirit money were burned as offerings to three grades of spirits—gods, ancestors, and ghosts (my ancestors could be your ghosts, of course)—denoting, he suggested, a cultural organization of the cosmos that specifically mirrored the social landscape and vice versa, a society that mirrored the cosmos. Wolf based his study on Taiwanese rural society, but generally widened the scoped and ramifications of his results. For years his study was widely cited to demonstrate what scholars wanted to assume, namely, the coherence and even structured nature of Chinese folk society. Yet thirty years later, his results appear terribly inflated.

Argument developed in Bell *Critical Terms,* pp. 205-24 or *Sociology of Religion,* ed. Fenn?


See the review article by Jeremy Zwelling, entitled “The Fictions of Biblical History,” in *History and Theory* 39, vol. 1 (February 2000): 117-141, which begins with Thompson’s *The Myth Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel,* but goes on to discuss the work of Mieke Bal and Daniel Boyarin among others.


It is easy to recognize that people who have never been exposed to any world view but that of their own isolated culture probably do not generally hold the sense of coexistence in the world with their deities that one can find in a worldly savant like Augustine of Hippo, who was aware of many ways of looking at a more or less meaningful universe. Indeed, the first type of society offers its people limited options, nothing more than greater or lesser involvement in the various cultic activities that are not mandated, as initiations or ancestral rites might be. The more cosmopolitan society provides many more and dramatic distinct options, such as those faced by Augustine, who, according to his not totally reliable Confessions, saw two worlds, two cosmologies, fundamentally opposed to each other, demanding that he choose. In fact he had chosen many times, but the demand for a choice never left his purview. He would make a melodramatic choice to believe
something specific, to turn from the cultural tradition of Terence and Virgil, to the biblical Christ of the North African Christianity of his day. His was a choice to engage in a new and specific set of relationships with the divine that brought a set of responsibilities accompanied generated by a very human community to which he was now tied. Mick McCarthy paper.

47 Christianity itself was never so homogenous that it could represent a unified modality or matrix, without variations in every possible component. The Christian matrix lived within the religion as well, as the Inquisition itself too clearly reminds us. Lopez’s presentation of the role of the Inquisition in defining the nature of belief represents a very historically defined moment in church history and one that sounds like a conceptual prelude to the Reformation. In the early Christian communities, we know that the nature of belief as well as the exact focus of belief were very much up for debate. What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem, asked Tertullian; Origen took up the same question roughly a century later. But a century after Origen, he was a declared heretic as the church came to define more clearly its place in a Greco-Roman empire, even if it fought off all Gnostic rationalizations of the particular divine-human revelation that Jesus Christ was thought to represent. The matrix is assembled slowly, and as it did, more corners and centers of Christendom experienced fewer choices or conversions, the rejections mere pro forma condemnations of distant heretics and pagans.

Prayer & Notes

Thesis --

Religion, Belief and Prayer are, for analytical purposes, three distinct entities — so some sort!

Analytic Move —

Breaking the automatic connection with religion allows fresh perspectives, particularly in view of the bind ‘religion’ is in when approached/defined ‘scientifically’. This is not to diss such efforts. But they do not allow us to unwrap religion, which is taken as a given, definitely a sociological, historical, psychological “thing” out there.

Historical Move —

There is a long history of sciences of man, sciences of religion, sciences of the social, etc., which have brought me and my various colleagues here today of course as a discourse community. These sciences revise and redo each other, but that is the nature of research, analysis, testing — and both our institutions of learning and the short-term historical memory of disciplines with increasing numbers of trunks of such written endeavors in our attics. And in an age of inter-disciplinary discussion, represented by the bestseller at least (the book that everyone is reading, must be read), a very welcome development in ages of specialization, we feel free to dip in and out of other fields without getting too bogged down by their historical luggage. I do it, you do it; we should be called on it at times.

Are Vico and Tyler so forgotten? Yes and no. We don’t build in American culture, we recreate, which requires razing the ground with dim remembering of any of its historical features, rarely acknowledging historical orientations that have delivered us to this moment. We ‘remember’ when we have other purposes.

Personal Identifications —

Sciences and cognitive theory are not my main resources/opponents/contexts, etc. for reasoning about religion and religion issues.

I use the evolving history of our thinking about religion — from the pre Christian elements of theology to the postmodern critiques of any such category as religion (or belief, etc)
In addition to this diachronic axis, I also use the more synchronic resources of modern (18-21st century) anthropology. (Sociology and psychology less thoroughly?) Added to a specialization in Chinese culture and history, this latter set of resources enables me to distance myself to some extent from aspects of debates revolving around English terms, Christian categories, and even the customs of the Euro-American academy. I am not unique in this background, nor more privileged (?) than that brought by others.

Verstehen and eklaren were basic to my education – with all the debates on the side of how to best verstehen, and the ramifications of the projects so envisioned. Postmodernism was not really challenging the full deck of cards here, due to its own sympathies toward verstehen.

Challenges –

Cognitive theory’s new universalism
Anthropology’s/area studies’ particularism
The persistent, because useful, divide between the social and the personal
Notes from Tomoko conversation about *Genealogies of the Study of Religion*
1-734-332-0164 Home

A genealogy of a subfield that is part of a larger effort to explain the field to outsiders (need seen in conversations with the Social Science Research Council) and perhaps to be the first product of a Mellon-sponsored conference on setting up rel depts. at UMichigan, UC Berkeley and Johns Hopkins, only major research universities without them (just programs at best). Outsiders do not understand about 'divinity' school programs, academic thrust of subfields like Biblical studies, or the major issues that drive the field in all its formations.

Not a survey of literature, not a history of major figures. More angled to explain the scholarship. what does the area stand for, what type of scholarship does it produce, how to understand the field. Issue-oriented. A book for orienting outsiders (unlike *Critical Terms* which addressed insiders somewhat provocatively).

My assignment: something about cognition, but not to be limited to cognitive theory as that has been recently defined. Not psychology of religion either. But because of my belief work, and my 'deft' handling of cognitive theory in my UChicago alum of the year talk.

Cognition and Performance: Study of the Religious Imagination
Cognition and Action in Studying the Religious Imagination
Cognitive States and Performative Activities
Questions of Cognition and Belief
Cognition and Belief
Cognitive Questions on Religious Dispositions
Cognition

NEED TO KNOW WHAT PHIL OF REL (M C TAYLOR) IS GOING TO COVER

She did not ask for anything on ritual and performance. Someone doing Anthropology of Religion: two on theology (i.e., Greely and David Tracey on catholic imagination; Veyne on historical/cultural imaginations; even JZS's *Imagining Religions: Babylon to Jonestown* [what does into say about imagining, who does it, scholar or native?] ); one on the Philosophy of Religion (which covers belief, hopefully religious language...); but no one the creation of art and no 'sociology' tho the highlights would be in anthropology.
--Marx? Feuerbach?
--Otto?
--Wm James
--Freud and Jung?
--Adaptive mechanism (Burkert; Boyer; ); softer Atran, Barrett, Andresen
--Rappaport (developing Durkheim, and more..)
--Belief : Wittgenstein, more philos. to Veyne more histo-cultural
--Geertz - cultural ideology, moods & motivations (cognition is the personal realm?)
--R. Needham
--Mysticism? Transcendence? (Underhill; lots of phil of rel on this; also Eliade) vs rationalism??
--Faith and Knowledge = phil of rel (justification as in Audi and Basil Mitchell [Klemke text 618
--Experience (W Proudfoot; Bob Sharf; Taves in ERel’05: also Wach Types of Religious Experience ’51 and Max Weber’s Sociology of Religion)
--Prayer?
--The sacred?
--Ritual as example of cog turn, via the attentions of Lawson and McCauley
--Why people believe outrageous things…. (Kaiminer, Shermer)

All these, but the study of religion – while ready to see religion in psycho-social-cultural terms – is not ready to reduce it to economics, frontal lobe anomalies, evolutionary adaptive mechanisms, but it is ready to see all these as part of the picture. Not religion as ‘sui generic,’ a position that was staked out by Eliade but not strongly picked up by the major figures or developments in the field, but a conflagration of forces and mechanisms, which could make it increasingly less relevant for large portions of society or, conversely, still playing a vital if historically different role in various cultural contexts.
Preface:  
example?)

Introduction:  
Craig Calhoun (for  
Tomoko Masuzawa  

includes discussions of (1) idiosyncratic and often multiple usages of terms, e.g., “history of religion(s),” “theological,” etc.; (2) prevalence of subfields “religion and ...” (dialogic fields and cognate fields); (3) relation—overlap, tension—among the subfields; (4) institutional backdrop to the relation between scholarly and confessional interests/activities]  

1. Comparative Religion [Eliade, Tillich, W.C. Smith]  
   [fold in “Religion and ...” / dialogic fields]  
   Jonathan Z. Smith  

2. Biblical Studies  
   Ward Blanton  

3. History of Christianity  
   [Christian origins, Patristics, church history]  
   Elizabeth Clark  

4. Historical Theology (?)  
   [medieval to early modern history of Christian thought]  
   Jonathan Sheehan  

5. Systematic Theology  
   [modern & contemporary philosophical theology]  
   Hent de Vries  

6. Philosophy of Religion  
   Mark C. Taylor  

7. History of Religions  
   [non-western and/or non-Biblical religions]  
   Donald S. Lopez  

8. Anthropology of Religion  
   Gillian Feeley-Harnik*  

9. Cognitive Theory (?)  
   [fold in / touch on psychology of religion]  
   Catherine Bell  

10. Religion and Society (?)  
    [emphasis on legal studies]  
    Winnifred Fallers Sullivan*  

11. Theory and Method  
    Tomoko Masuzawa
BELIEVING

And the Practice of Religion

Catherine Bell
Frontispiece

-- Wittgenstein: "The meaning of prayer is the activity of praying." (Phillips '65:3
Concept of Prayer)
-- Macy: "belief" does not exist, just beliefs. (No! Just acts of believing)
-- Zizek: belief the structuring principle of socially bound lives and deepest yearnings

-- (Based on Mark Lilla, NYTMag art -> book) To more scholars, religion in its fullness
is unfamiliar, more easily romanticized. The more society today, thinking to contain religion,
emphasizes the secularity of our society, the more unfamiliar religion becomes, the more ‘other.’
Secular and religious mutually define each other, just as does science and religion. For many
religions, secular West is all that is godless. But are we really so secular; or just degrees of
difference, not along a spectrum but multiple dimensions (gov’t, individual, etc).
Frontispiece

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To

Steven
Contents

Dedication

Preface
Introduction: Belief, Beliefs, Believing
  Universal and particular
  Historical semantics
  Problems of particularism
  Practicing
Chapter One: The Social History of Belief

Chapter Two: The Psychological Perspective

Chapter Three: The Biology of Belief

Chapter Four: Practicing Belief

Chapter Five: The Data of Believing

Chapter Six: Theory Confers, Infers, Defers

Notes

Bibliography
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

Introduction. The Problem of Belief
   -- Why Belief is a problem for this book
   -- Problem status in various fields
   -- researching this book has taken from: Hume to Dennett to the new pragmatism of Rorty and literary criticism of Herrnstein-Smith or continental criticism of Foucault; anthropology from Evans-Pritchard through Needham and Rappaport; historically Pelikan Arnold etc; wm James to Wink; sociology; cognitive and evolutionary neuroscience Churchland as well as the wildly growing field of cognitive anthropology-psychology Boyer Whitehouse. Many of these lines of thinking link to the each other and are regularly tapped by scholars of religion. So I will focus as much as possible on the study of religion and the field of religious studies, which will bring in so much more in the course of the discussion. This processual decision is not meant to be ontologically or historically descriptive, simply a tactic for dealing with the plethora of material in regard to the goals of this book.
   -- Goal = Not aiming at a theory (see Bauerlein), but a conversation, less about how we think of ourselves (reigning conversations about religion ??) and more about how we are doing with our inherited interpretive categories... Hope to introduce the possibility of a new way of speaking about belief that does not violate too much entrench linguistic habits of the world in which we live -- which would doom any new attempt -- but attempts simply to heighten awareness and shift the emphasis of certain relationships in that world. So will not seek to condemn or advocate a ban on language of belief, but change where our confidence lies when using it. Quine on how pragmatic analysis undertakes "the task of making explicit what had been tacit, and precise what had been vague; of exposing and resolving paradoxes, smoothing kinks, lopping off vestigial growths, clearing the ontological slums." (Bauerlein 2, see ff)
   -- Section by section précis

Chapter One. Belief, Beliefs, Believing

   -- [this section can be fitted into the beginning of the next one] the definitional morass, in English and beyond: versions of the folk category an what is debated in it; more formal attempts in neuroscience, cognitive science, anthropology? Philosophy...); going beyond English (are there beliefs where there are not words for such things?)

   -- Universalism vs Particularism
      - Argument against Christian universalism: Lopez, Pouillon, Ruel, Wiebe?
      - Cult semantics & Hist linguistics: Pelikan, Needham, Veyne? WCSmith?
      - Hist and Cult utility ie 'social fact': Arnold, Shweder, Southwald
      - Cognitive and Evolutionary arguments: Boyer, Rappaport
         Or Biological here and Cognitive in next subgroup?
Chapter 1: Introduction: The problem; Belief, Beliefs, Believing; overview of whole

a) Main problems identified: Universal or particular; mental or performative; private or social. This is the supposed universality given Christian assumptions; the problem of implied individual/private existence, as well as the historical, political cultural “social fact.”

[Durk on rel as beliefs and rites suggests that these two categories may be the founding assumptions of universality in the study of religion.]

b) Many (all anthrop?) declare they cannot use the term (Ruel, Pouillan, Needham, Wulff, Lopez), tho others have productively done so (Southwold, Arnold, phil of rel ...?).

c) History of religions/rel studies has not examined its use; in fact, it appears to deny its importance per se, but such unexamined assumptions can be very misleading, ill serving (leaving our discourse more theological?). Unexamined use of the term does make arguments rest on inherently theological (or about theology) grounds (distance from or ally with Wiebe?):
-- historical exp of Christian credo formulation
-- faith rooted in individual experience [cp ‘science’ explaining cognitive/biology of belief]
-- ignoring how belief is used ethnically, politically, role of polls (census already noted); Viswanathan, Lilla, etc
-- Theorization of belief in theology (Reckwitz)

d) The problems resulting from or just accompanying the current particularism (when a theological-universal is rejected for particularistic; eg Needham; Evans Pritchard, etc) and post-colonial analysis (Lopez); benefits of particularism too, of course! Namely,
-- the subtle reintroduction of universalist assumptions endemic to any posturing of “study.” Need to grapple with that!
-- ramifications for any definition of “religion” and methods for its study, e.g. religious studies

[“Religion”: Paradigms plus: use Chidester on West slow to call others’ “religion”; also add JZS to argument about Christianity as prototype (see Guide to SofRel 41, Drugery 90) and his world religions research (before Masuzawa) Guide 11-42, Map 295?, Harvard Theo Rev ’96:295-6.]

e) Practice theory: value of a focus on believing and construction of a focus on practice; later look at multiple examples of believing from a comparative practice stance...
-- Mental Private Experience vs Performative Social Representation
  Wm James, Hume, Wulff, Needham, Reckwitz?, Zizek
  Also Boyer as anti Social Representation

Chapter Two.
  -- Thinking. Social History of Belief – how bodies of theological doctrines arise
    (Izutsu); oral vs written (Pelikan, Good); Language of Comparative Religion (WHSmith,
    Wiebe)
    -- Traditions of Western Rel or how once Christians Came to Believe (not
      the first?) they decided others do or should; Pagans, Primitives and all those “other”
      religions; Description of Islamic orthodox development. Pelikan and WCSmith

  -- Feeling. Experience = Psychological Center – explaining mysticism, collective
    representations, cultural symbols

  --[Socio-]Biology of Belief or Cognitive Naturalism

Chapter Three. Believing – A Doing not a Thinking or a Feeling

  Mechanisms that are psycho-social focus on individual
  Prayer as agency (vs the lack of agency in most social and critical theory views
    that would have social structuring lead to embodied ideology
  Cosmologies for action
  Compartments vs coherence
  But It Feels Better: Your Truth, My Truth
  Performative practices for constructing a formulaic psycho-social identity
  Role of the marginal & imaginative (aka hope)

4. Constituencies with a Stake, Some Suggestions for the Study of Believing

  Scientists, Religionists, Scholars, and the Rest
  Let Me Count the Ways (we believe)
  Who are we trying to convince
  Breaking out of the Us/Them’s: Scholars have no purchase, just interest
Chapter 2: Theorizing Belief: Three Exclusive Angles

a) The Social History of Belief: Take the above-mentioned emergence of theological doctrine and find in it a purely social historical explanation (Izutsu-ish; Veyne) Greek world - early Christian social/theological heritage – involves a theory of belief as developing in response to social challenges from within or without, so very likely in plural environment, even midst ‘orthopraxy’, that is, more isolated society, where there are still challenges that occasion some degree of formulation of resolve and practice, even if it is simply reason for greater or lesser participation; so all cultures are involved in this approach to belief-formation even when minimally in formal ideas. Lilla, Ruel, Izard

b) The Psychological Analysis of Belief: Take the psychological theme and find in it an historical recasting in terms of experience (Christian -post-Reformation w/ a contrast w Enlightenment rationality yielding the irrational, and Arnold-type explanation of personal reflection on (or against); role of empirical reality, social influence, etc. WJames, Wulff, Needham

c) The Biology of Belief #3: cognitive theories of neurophysiology, neuroscience, evolutionary adaptation, incl. Barrett, Atan and Rapaport, Fuller notes
Chapter 3: Believing: A Practice Theory

a) Makes non-dualist activities the main focus, not secondary to some mental orientation. Enables the exploration of the mentalities of performance; focus on expressions, not representations;

b) Universals that accompany all theorizing are theoretical categories not data; what this angles hides is outweighed by what it affords: access to components of world construction, individual/social from another perspective; a wider characterization based on power arrangements

c) The cosmological (w/wo coherence) and the contradictory (as power structuring, empowering) in the independent and the plural societies, doctrinal and non-doctrinal traditions

d) Practice theory approach w/ 4 features;

Southwold, Arnold, Cameron, Bourdieu

Chapter 4: Believing -- Case Studies in How Practice Approach Informs ...

Responding to polls; Praying for money; Healing; Evangelical face-to-face witnessing; Abiding by the book; Ritual grazing; Chinese morality? Magic?

Conclusion:

Role of theory in ‘conferring’, not presuming, universalism -- even as it involves uncovering and recovering particularism (how differs from Shweder?); how this meets the post-colonial critique. Using the terminology of believing.
As she was approaching ninety years of age, my mother began to talk more directly about God, what she believed, and whether she could be found wanting. As the child who studied religion, I got all her hard questions. Invariably, however, she would structure the conversation around the same points and what I had to say, whether challenging or soothing, never really mattered. “I’m not sure I believe or not. I certainly don’t think it’s likely there’s the sort of God I was ever taught to believe in. It’s hard to believe there is a God who cares about us. All I can do is hope that if God exists, he’ll accept that I tried to understand and that I tried to live a good life -- I did what I could.” My mother did not want a theological response and she certainly had no use for any historical or comparative framing. She was trying to make things right, work out who she had been, in her own estimation, and clarify what she could believe and what was too uncomfortable to invoke even at this late moment in her life. She inevitably wanted the comfort of being true to herself and, naturally, being on the right side of God should he exist. After all, she repeated, she was a believer “in her own way.” However, my mother would regularly begin and end these predominantly one-sided discussions with the “hard” questions: “Am I a believer or not? What counts as belief?”

There are many reasons to address my mother’s specific and more general questions of my mother. This book, however, will not even make the attempt. It is an effort quite different, limited and, from my mother’s perspective, hopelessly abstract. Aside from the fact that I would hesitate to discuss topics for which I have such a poor track record of useful contributions, my agenda is shaped by other issues. Yet I take up the topic of belief, in my own way, quite aware that for many people questions about belief are very personal and often complicated. Hopefully, my more abstract perspective will not lose sight of this fact.

I address the phenomenon of believing for several reasons, none of them quite so motivationally distinct as they might appear here. For starters, I was reminded of a challenge to myself contained in the opening page of my first book on thinking about ritual to return some day to give equal attention to that other component of religion identified in the simple Durkheimian definition of religion of ritual and belief. In an short effort in that direction, I was surprised that this ubiquitous term among scholars of religion had received so little attention by the comparativists, those most exposed to other ways of believing. Some discussions certainly exist and they will be fully mined here. Yet they are all quite polemical, usually limited
in scope, and rarely invoke the more expansive treatments of the topic available in related disciplines such as anthropology, history, and philosophy. New developments were the goad that made the enormous challenge irresistible. On the one hand, a spate of books on the rationality of religious belief by some eminent scholars and writers, among others, staked out some highly ludicrous/questionable positions given much attention by the popular press. On the other hand, new theoretical and empirical developments in cognitive neuropsychology (cognitive theory) were introducing the perspective, and fruits, of a new rationalism to the study of religion. Their various studies of religious belief appeared to redefine the topic that was so rarely addressed by more traditional scholars of religion.

There are, of course, even broader reasons to inquire into our ideas about believing. This is a contradictory time. For many, secular and religious boundaries have never been as clear and important. Yet for others, confidence in the exorable spread of secular modernity is giving way to a new examination of the self-interested assumptions underlying this European and American ideology; the door is open for scholars of all persuasions to take religious beliefs with a new seriousness. Today religious strife, the form in which secular society generally notices religion, does not appear as simply another form of class struggle, colonial resistance, or opposition to modernization. Rather, a fragile consensus is forming that ideas matter, cultures matter, religion matters. But at this time of opportunity, the developments of the last thirty years leave many scholars of religion unable to pass through that door, let alone help explain what is on the other side. Stimulating scholarship on embodiment and performance, as well as more highly nuanced discussions of older distinctions between oral literate cultures, or tribal and creedal religions make it uncomfortable to return to the term belief. And the insights of postmodernist and postcolonial studies give us an aversion to characterizing (essentializing) large entities such as Islam or global Christian evangelicalism in terms of their beliefs. We are effectively sidelined for the very discussion to which we could be particularly relevant.

These reasons reasons for a book on such a huge, amorphous and contentious topic as belief lead me, first of all, to impose some order on our resources for addressing it and our past patterns of engagement. New sources of information, either ignored or overly embraced by scholars of religion, also demand incorporation. And the book does argue a thesis; while clear, in the spirit of the age it affirms this, problematizes that, ultimately suggesting a shift of perspective to afford a reasonable, and effective way to deal with competing scholarly goals.
When I first decided to study religion so many years ago there were a number of clear issues on my mind, topics that I wanted to understand and that possible to understand. Foremost among these topics was the question of belief. If I had articulated it then I might have put it something like this: Are there effective ways to understand the reasons for types and degrees of belief such as those I had encountered in my admittedly limited experience? Given the background was bring to my studies, I would have continued, I am set to take belief seriously but unsure how to bring all of its dimensions under the light of objective examination. Reading on this topic had intrigued me and drew me to study religion, but my own experience with religion convinced me that solving the question of belief, whatever “solving” might mean, it, would involve the attempt to address something very profoundly human. Graduate studies and the demands of an academic career, however, do not encourage anything but the most delineated questions and projects, always with the assumption that the larger issues are more properly addressed “later” as one matured in knowledge and experience. It has been gratifying in my ‘mature’ years to see a few colleagues shift their focus to consider more encompassing formulations that ultimately animate the study of religion. More often we are apt to stay in the small field we have plowed for years, digging a little deeper, widening one’s contribution, but always trying to get the specifics of a discrete set of phenomenon as right as possible. Those big, floppy questions with which we began usually looked a bit naïve as they were stowed in the closet of old artifacts.

For me this book is a return to my early over-sized queries. It is a grateful but anxious return. Despite the some satisfaction of addressing the bigger questions around which the intellectual details of my career might possibly be rendered more coherent, I have known that the probability of a satisfying set of answers if very slim. This long delayed feat of gestation might give birth to a mere mouse, that is, a morsel of well-meant effort wrapped up wordy explications of what were never quite the right question to begin with. But armed with various protective dissemblings, I rose to the bait provided by the sheer size and prominence of the void, the void that is the absence of any real attention to the concept of belief in the most definitive tool of the trade, the Encyclopedia of Religion. In both the original 1986 edition and the revision of 2005, there is no entry for the term belief. An inquisitive reader is instructed to “See Doubt (and Belief)” for what
the revised edition explains is a philosophical discussion of the interrelation of doubt and belief in the Western tradition (get a quote here). It is in fact more theological than philosophical; it is certainly not a social scientific analysis of the term or the phenomenon. [More on references to belief in EofR as developed in Smith Festschrift]

Such a lacuna at the heart of religious studies is intriguing in any number of ways. Oversights have the own peculiar logic which, as Freud suggested, may reveal the contrivances that keep a particular logical structure afloat as an effective discourse. Perhaps the explicit unease the term has caused a handful of ethnographers (from Needham to Ruel?) and historians (Lopez) is the cause of this lacuna. Or it might be that the signature discussion of belief and faith by an eminence of a particular school of religious studies (W C Smith, D Wiebe) suggests a narrowing specificity to any further treatment. Yet, however much these arguments might also constitute material for more encompassing engagement, the sheer fact that hardly a page can be turned in the Encyclopedia of Religion, or most other books in the field, without seeing the author’s recourse to the term from one angle or another itself demands a more self-conscious and critically reflexive analysis.

Scholars of religion are insignificant in the dynamic popular engagement of the phenomenon. In this decade the question of belief has been the subject of volleys of mass-market publications. The decade began with Michael Shermer’s Why People Believe Weird Things (1997) and Wendy Kaminer’s Sleeping with Extra-Terrestrials (1999). More recently a stir has greeted The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins, Breaking the Spell by Daniel Dennett, and The End of Faith by Sam Harris. Yet the foregoing authors see themselves are merely responding to the popularity and assertive styles of American religion. There has been a remarkable growth of religious publishing, effectively epitomized by the success of Huston Smith’s The World Religions and the Christian fundamentalist novel, Going Beyond. Simultaneously, biological and evolutionary accounts of the roots and rise of religion, introduced by Dawkins’s The God Gene by Richard Dawkins, have been equally numerous, with such titles as Why God Won’t Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief by A. Newburg et al., and The God Part of the Brain by Matthew Alper. The level of interest in religion and belief in this post-millennial era is unquestionably high. While scientists have weighed in on the problems of religiosity despite how
our evolutionary heritage makes us biologically prone to believe, and the specter of religious terrorism has made all thinking people try to better understand religious dispositions, scholars of religion have generally been very slow to engage the bigger question at the root of these discussions. not engaged any particular part of the wide-ranging interest in what it is to believe. While not nearly as entertaining as some of the aforementioned titles, this book is a small contribution to effort to locate and animate this discussion within the formal study of religion.

Materials included here were first developed for three conferences and subsequently published, in part, under the aegis of those events: a small conference sponsored by Dartmouth College in 2000, which subsequently published the papers as Radical Interpretation in Religion, edited by Nancy K Frankenberry; a joint Princeton-Oxford seminar on “Faith in the Ancient World” held in 2006-07, with my presentation subsequently developed in part for publication in Introducing Religion: Essays in Honor of Jonathan Z. Smith (2007) and a volume of seminar papers currently under development .... ; and finally a small conference on religion held by the journal History and Theory at Wesleyan College, which published the papers in a 2006/7 special issue of the journal. I am grateful to my colleagues at these events for their generous responses to my initial efforts in this area and their permissions to reproduce sections of that material.

I am indebted to the generosity of the College of Arts and Sciences at Santa Clara University for the time to work on the early stages of this book and to a research fellowship from the National Endowment for Humanities (2007-2008) during which time it was put into its final form. Finally, I want to thank my husband, Steven Gelber, who prodded me to continue to work on this book despite many physical distractions: he believed in me and this project and would brook no heretical objections.

Catherine Bell
2007
Introduction - "The Problem of Belief"

An investigation of a topic should begin with an explanation of why that topic warrants one's interest in the first place. In other words, an investigator should understand why the topic constitutes a 'problem' – at least for her. Of course, many scholarly investigations, indeed some of the best, focus on topics that most people do not consider a problem; only a small pool of similarly-focused colleagues would pay any attention. Analysis of the type of problem posed by the topic is also not really a preliminary step so much as the initial stage of an argument that will permeate all subsequent stages. In the same vein, any answer as to why the topic constitutes a problem worthy of study is usually not the whole of it; the reasons to research a topic are usually not the research itself. Although why something strikes us as needing to be accounted for often goes far to explain how that topic might be more effectively understood.

I entered graduate school with a history of on-again off-again believing, a set of experiences that made me very aware of the intricacies of religious belief and its powerful role in shaping how a person acts. What could be more basic to study? I was eager to assemble a fuller and more objective picture of what happens when people believe, why they believe, or what makes them continue to believe. Admittedly, these were questions that even a first-year graduate student understood as shaped by large historical forces: clearly, at one time and in other places, people may not be aware of themselves as believers; and questions about belief were wonderfully general about religion as some sort of clear cut phenomenon when most belief is not in religion so much as it is in such and such a deity or doctrine or practice. And then there are all the beliefs that have little to do as religion in our secular societies.

The effect of graduate school's reorientations and specializations is such that only now do I have the time and inclination to return to such an unwieldy topic. And it is also one of the effects of graduate school and a career in the scholarly community, that one ends up primarily interested in how scholars, or others, have put together this category and proceeded to use it – or ignore it – even more than how the phenomenon might exist or in the world. I do not doubt that in so far as our words mean anything belief does exist, though its parameters may be more or less large, even less clearly demarcated, while the problem of its effective characterization will be the heart of this book. Yet the topic of belief has always been a 'problem' to those who would change the way in which another people were religious; or those for whom a secular separation of the
sphere of rational discourse was fairly distinct from discourse of various religiously-minded communities, a group that would include scholars focused on that other great category, 'religion'; or even those whose theological or pastoral instincts, shaped by this modern differentiation of spheres, wished to address themselves to the religiosity of those in their care, being wont to talk as much about what believers should believe. From the cross-cultural contact of missionaries and ethnologists, through the intelligentsia’s mapping of social facts, to the immersed theologians reflecting the relevant categories—all speak of beliefs.

And again, these are just the religious applications of the term. Must a study on religious belief be doing its part to maintain the borders of the secular/religious worldview? While one might imagine a scholarly warrior, or Enlightenment hamunekra, battling the evidence of encroachment or lack of clear walls—we call all name several—but it may be more likely that a study is defending religion as a scholarly focus, since it is the field in which so many of us hold our credentials and receive our salaries. Yet this does not explain the way in which a large swath of scholars of religion ignore the topic: not philosophers or psychologists of religion, but historians of religion (phenomenologists?), comparativists, and specialists in particular traditions.

Today awareness of the historically provisional nature of any such secular questioning is routinely considered part of the ‘problem’ identified with the topic. As an individual scholar with the training generally expected of an academician I share a perspective with other disciplinary approaches the distinctive biases which we are not expected to transcend, but we are certainly encouraged to explore. When such biases are made the subject of scrutiny they can lead the investigator in circles of self-examination. ... The compensation, adequate or inadequate, depends on where the study locates its dominant bias, as in the bias of secularism, defined as ‘not including’ or ‘opposed to’ religion, or the bias of colonialism, argued to propagate distortions deriving from one culture’s assumptions about belief.

1 Needham notes the definitions of religion that depend on belief: Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Geertz, etc. pp 21. “standard acceptation of belief as the distinctive feature of religion...” E-P appears convinced that the lack of “a system of nomenclature” enabling the “wide comparative study of phenomena” hindered his presentation of Zande religion, and if provided would be of great service. (EP p8)
Scholars of religion, however, have always addressed belief, as well as beliefs in science and secularism. Nonetheless, for them as well as the larger population, belief is commonly understood to be the essential feature of religion. However, few in Religious Studies have explored the pertinent ambiguities of the term. Donald Lopez was a welcome voice on the matter, following by many years the work of W.C Smith and his critic Donald Weibe. The 1986 Encyclopedia of Religion, edited by Mircea Eliade, did not even include a distinct entry for “Belief”; under that heading the reader is told to “See Doubt (And Belief).”

The ambitious goal of this book is, simultaneously, to propose an analysis of the tangle of history and current motivation that might influence a tendency to think of religious belief as a clear entity, or a clear problem; to analyze how constructions of religious belief have governed our thinking about religion; and to propose a way to enable our ingrained linguistic patterns to lead to translations of allow for a wider variety of experience than older patterns have generally allowed.

It became something of a reflex of “the problem” of belief, a problem first identified by Hume, who suggested that particular “operation of the mind” constitutes “one of the greatest mysteries of philosophy.” Bertrand Russell added a serious emphasis, avering that “belief ... is the central problem in the analysis of mind.” Its status as a problem in philosophy continues.

On another front, the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard was the first to broach the idea that categories like belief, as with the process of cultural translation in general, may not be able to convey type of spiritual relationships in Zande have, the mystical notions (kwoth) they find supported by their own experience [N 29: a verbal concept of belief does exist in Nuer...ngath; E-P distinguishes faith from belief, tho N does not, no reference]. His student, Rodney Needham, undertook a comprehensive analysis of the idea, and determined that its Indo-European roots made it inadequate to translate concepts and interior experiences from cultures that never saw any need to generate a comparable concept. N Donald Lopez depicts the internalization of belief.

3 Rodney Needham, Belief, Language and Experience (University of Chicago, 1972), p. 7 (Russell, 'The Analysis of Mind' 1921, p. 231. who echoed in Needham, p. 7. It was to become important to Pierce and Quine, Hartshorne and Wittgenstein, even among more recent .
in the historical circumstances of the Inquisition and its role in cross-cultural obscurantism in the colonial reach of its Christian biases. N Rejecting the conclusions of his disciplinary forebearers, the anthropologist Richard Shweder finds that belief embodies the “faultline”... (1989). 4

But Rodney Needham's invaluable analysis of the concept, both philosophically and anthropologically, argued that it could not be restricted to any particular academic disciplines since it “has to do with the fundamental premises of any humane discipline.” 5 Talal Asad's “genealogy” of religion argue that an critical emphasis on belief as the internal psychology of individuals, (Needham conclusion) enabled marginalization of religion in the modern world. 6 (1998: xvii). In the context of postcolonial literary criticism, Gauri Viswanathan extends Asad's argument to the role of conversion, an intense experience for believers, central to the narrative of the modern state as it opposes the emotional subjectivity of minorities to the politics of their civil rights. (??) 7

In one form or another, belief is also prominent on the current landscape of popular life in America. Not confined to secularists, belief has become an explicit problem for many citizens over the last decade in which they have been haunted by acts of Islamist terrorism and polarized by the political influence of the Christian right. In a series of high profile books, the biologist Richard Dawkins decries the “God Delusion”; the philosopher Daniel Dennett seeks to “Break the Spell”; while the ... Christopher Hitchins pulls no punches in decrying the “poison” of belief in the supernatural. Hence the popular press finds belief to be a contentious topic at a time of unprecedented social polarization between so-called believers and atheists. At the same time, however, some postmodern writers suggest that the religious believer/secular atheist dichotomy is effectively transcended. Wayne Proudfoot, eminent philosopher of religion, writes that any conflict between religious belief and scientific concepts is now simply “a naive misunderstanding” of both. 8 The philosopher John Caputo more whimsically argues that in this “post-secular” age, religion and science are not opposites, rather “the opposite of a religious

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4 Richard A. Shweder 1989
5 Rodney Needham, Belief, Language and Experience (University of Chicago, 1972), xiv.
person is a loveless person” or a “selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon.” Anyone who loves something madly is evidence of a “religion without religion.”

Historically, of course, belief has been the focus of analyses of religion stretching from Irenaeus to Karl Rahner, David Hume to Donald Davidson, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith to Slavoj Žižek. To explore the concept of belief from its earliest roots to its modern conundrums would, of course, be an enormous, and therein quite scattered, survey. Sheer semantic spread suggests a few problems inherent to belief in popular usage. For example, the term is used for religious commitment to sacred truths as well as one’s degree of confidence in a weather report or intention to take even a trivial action (that old master of the language, W C Fields’s “Everyone should believe in something. I believe I’ll have another drink.”) This study will simply probe the issues attending belief that seem most relevant to how the study of religion conducts itself today. Its purpose is less systematicity than provocation, that is, it will attempt to indicate all the problems and resources by which to generate a conversation within the study of religion about this most basic of categories.

The goal of this study is not a new theory of belief. Such a project would cement the reification that is already enshrined in this concept. No, the goal is to contribute to a conversation about how we think of ourselves (already underway in regard to the category of religion ???) and how we think about what we are doing with our inherited interpretive categories. This is a pragmatic analysis that, in the words of Quine, emulates “the task of making explicit what had been tacit, and precise what had been vague; of exposing and resolving paradoxes, smoothing kinks, lopping off vestigial growths, clearing the ontological slums.” (Bauerlein 2, see ff) I hope to suggest and support the possibility of a new way of speaking about belief that neither so violates entrench linguistic habits of the world in which we live that it is doomed from the beginning nor shuns the real work task of heightening awareness that leads to a shift in the emphasis of certain relationships in this world. Therefore I will not seek to condemn or

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advocate a ban on language of belief, however trendy that might seem, but instead aim at changing where our confidence lies when using it.
Few terms are more broadly scattered across the palette of Western languages than...rough equivalents of the noun and verb, belief and believe. The definitional morass, in English and beyond: versions of the folk category an what is debated in it; more formal attempts in neuroscience, cognitive science, anthropology? Philosophy...); going beyond English (are there beliefs where there are not words for such things?). Least read book: Needham

Some describe the difficulties of defining belief and then getting at the experience described (Arnold 19: Needham argues that one cannot get at the diff betw belief, its expression in language and its experience in lived reality)

Today the topic of religious belief fills the **popular press** of the secular world. Global and regional terrorism generate numerous attempts to explain the political and redemptive logic of religious beliefs. (nb M Lilla 2007) The 200(?) decision by the Kansas State School Board to include ‘intelligent design’ in the high school (?) science curriculum occasioned more blanket critiques of religious beliefs by distinguished scientists among others, even though the decision was reversed when a new school board was voted in the following year. (Dennett, Dawkins, Harris, et alia). Overall, the story of Western secularism is being rewritten due to the unexpected roles of religious belief in shaping events.

For Anthropology, however, the issue was the subject of an extended exploration that included E E Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham, Martin Southwold and Richard Schweder ....among others. It appears that the field most dependent upon the concept of belief is the most reluctant to fully engage its complexities.

Chapter one addresses the various tensions that have contradictorily shaped discussions of belief. Foremost is the impasse between the forces of universalism on the one hand and particularism on the other. It has been a working assumption throughout the history of discussions of religion that belief is universal; it is an assumption that continues to prop up the whole explanatory framework of “comparative religion,” “world religions,” and “global religions.” Yet a handful of impressive voices have long argued for the particularism of belief, notably, its embeddness in the Christian identity that was forged in the early centuries of *anno domino*. To use a term so coined by and saturated with a Christian outlook is only to handicap further any scholarly rags of objectivity. An equally powerful tensions exist between thinking of belief as mental or physical, private or social. Is belief something that the individual embraces in his or her heart and mind, on the basis of which the individual participates in a social community marked by rites and customs; or is belief the product of one’s social involvement in such a community and it exists only as a performative disposition and bodily experience that is instigated as much in a social context as private one? The study of religion has tracked in different directions based on how they favor one set of tensions over another. Certain Catholic or Protestant tendencies lace these choices, but many other factors have become equally important.

Chapter Two takes us the historical treatment of belief. Not simply how it came to be associated with Christian identity, but whether it predates Christianity, without assuming universality. one of the lower key tensions surrounding belief is whether it should be reserved for personal commitment to a set of doctrines or used more loosely to fit the evidence that people made
choices about the nature, degree and object of their commitments. Further, there are several studies that argue for the social conditions in which ‘believing’ comes to be expected of followers and the nature of that belief is very much shaped by the questions that emerged in these communities and how they came to be answered -- by formalizing doctrine, sectarian division, or emerging authority structures.

Universalism vs Particularism
- Argument against Christian particularism/universalism: Lopez, Pouillon, Ruel, Wiebe?
- Cult semantics & Hist linguistics: Pelikan, Needham, Veyne? WCSmith?
- Hist and Cult utility ie ‘social fact’: Arnold, Shwedner, Southwald
- Cognitive and Evolutionary arguments: Boyer, Rappaport
  Or Biological here and Cognitive in next subgroup?

[Beware the universalism of theoretical language and its wielders]

Mental Private Experience vs Performative Social Representation
Wm James, Hume, Wulff, Needham, Reckwitz?, Zizek
Also Boyer as anti Social Represen
Introduction. The Problem of Belief
-- Why Belief is a problem for this book
-- Problem status in various fields
-- researching this book has taken from: Introduction. The Problem of Belief
-- Why Belief is a problem for this book
-- Problem status in various fields
-- researching this book has taken from: Hume to Dennett to the new pragmatism of
Rorty and literary criticism of Herrnstein-Smith or continental criticism of Foucault;
anthropology from Evans-Pritchard through Needham and Rappaport; historically Pelikan
Arnold etc; wmn James to Wini...; sociology; cognitive and evolutionary neuroscience
Churchland as well as the wildly growing field of cognitive anthropology-psychology Boyer
Whitehouse. Many of these lines of thinking link to the each other and are regularly tapped by
scholars of religion. So I will focus as much as possible on the study of religion and the field of
religious studies, which will bring in so much more in the course of the discussion. This
processual decision is not meant to be ontologically or historically descriptive, simply a tactic for
dealing with the plethora of material in regard to the goals of this book.
-- Goal = Not aiming at a theory (see Bauerlein), but a conversation, less about how we
think of ourselves (reigning conversations about religion ????) and more about how we are doing
with our inherited interpretive categories... Hope to introduce the possibility of a new way of
speaking about ‘belief’ that does not violate too much entrench linguistic habits of the world in
which we live -- which would doom any new attempt -- but attempts simply to heighten
awareness and shift the emphasis of certain relationships in that world. So will not seek to
condemn or advocate a ban on language of belief, but change where our confidence lies when
using it. Quine on how pragmatic analysis undertakes “the task of making explicit what had been
tacit, and precise what had been vague; of exposing and resolving paradoxes, smoothing kinks,
lopping off vestigial growths, clearing the ontological slums.” (Bauerlein 2, see ff)
-- Section by section précis
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Introduction - “The Problem of Belief”

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one’s interest in the first place. In other words, an investigator should understand why the topic
constitutes a ‘problem’ – at least for her. After all, most scholarly investigations, indeed some of
the best, focus on topics that many people do not consider a problem. Analysis of the problem
posed by the topic is also not a preliminary step so much as the initial stage of an argument that
will permeate subsequent stages. In the same vein, an answer to why the topic constitutes a problem worthy of study is usually not the whole of it; in other words, the reasons to research a topic are usually not the research itself, although why something strikes us as needing to be accounted for often go far to explain how that topic might be more effectively understood.

A personal longstanding reason for a book inquiring into the phenomenon of religious belief is simple. Once I was a believer, thoughtfully and intimately committed, and then I was no longer one, with a different set of thoughts and emotions. While I was able to ‘explain’ my believing and my not-believing in the popular Freudian patois of the day, I wanted to assemble a fuller picture of what had happened and explore whether what was true for me might useful for understanding others. These were the personal motivations among the various circumstances that led me to the study of religion in the first place. There are also more immediate triggers for this project on belief. For example, my first book addressed ritual and I noted at the time that a full study of religion would demand a corresponding analysis of belief, following the great Durkheim in the simple definition of religion as a matter of beliefs and rites. This definition remains a working, first-level description of religion, so for both scholarly and popular ways of slicing of religion, belief would be a natural topic to follow work on ritual. Another spur to engage the topic in some way lay in the realization that my discipline, the history of religions, has given rather short shrift to the whole issue of belief even as it remains a major purveyor of the term.

The Encyclopedia of Religion, in both first and second editions, fails to include a discrete entry for such a basic concept. The oversight, if it is that, was greatly redressed with Donald S. Lopez’s 1998 essay on belief in Mark Taylor’s Critical Terms for the Study of Religion, to which this study will constantly refer. Taking these motivating circumstances together, one might conclude that I will understand belief to be an essential though too easily ignored topic in the study of religion. Granted. However, I will be especially curious about how belief could be ignored. And I will also argue that how we deal with the category of belief is tightly linked to how we understand and investigate religion, as ethnographic phenomenon or analytic concept. The fact that belief –

1 The first 1986 edition edited by Mircea Eliade, the 2005 edition by Lindsay Jones
2 Taylor 1998
3 Needham notes the definitions of religion that depend on belief: Durkheim, Radcliffe-Brown, Geertz, etc. pp 21. “standard acception of belief as the distinctive feature of religion... “ E-P appears convinced that the lack of “a system of nomenclature” enabling the “wide comparative study of phenomena” hindered his presentation of Zande religion, and if provided would be of great service. (EP p8)
especially the irrationality of having it – is the focus of a spurt of publications by scientists, philosophers, and cultural critics was another factor in the shaping of this study. The extra public attention to very simple understandings of belief acts as a reminder: questions about the personal experience of belief are never far removed unless one is rendered oblivious to them by the anesthetizing qualities of the scholarly approach. The conflict between this approach and popular concern with belief replicate familiar stances rooted in the eighteenth century Enlightenment. The secular scholar inquiring into belief, a task imagined by the scholar more than the believer, must fear acting the part of an Enlightenment homunculus defined by the classic ascriptions of faith in conflict with reason, faith as the object of reason, or faith objectified by the ‘neutral’ forces of reason. To stand in the position of a non-believing secularist is, we know, to look at religion from a very particular perspective, one that is taken to be foreign to the practitioner’s self-consciousness. So many answers I might entertain to my questions about belief could constitute answers only from one angle and not another, perhaps not to believers. With that awareness, the constraints of the Enlightenment on the questions it allows are as clear as the liberties we know it affords.

Today awareness of the historically provisional nature of any such secular questioning is routinely considered part of the ‘problem’ identified with the topic. As an individual scholar with the training generally expected of an academician I share a perspective with other disciplinary approaches the distinctive biases which we are not expected to transcend, but we are certainly encouraged to explore. When such biases are made the subject of scrutiny they can lead the investigator in circles of self-examination. … The compensation, adequate or inadequate, depends on where the study locates its dominant bias, as in the bias of secularism, defined as ‘not including’ or ‘opposed to’ religion, or the bias of colonialism, argued to propagate distortions deriving from one culture’s assumptions about belief.

The ambitious goal of this book is, simultaneously, to identify the bias that casts religious belief as a problem, to analyze how constructions of belief have governed our studies of religion, and to propose a way to enable ingrained linguistic patterns to lead to translations of a wider variety of experience than such patterns have generally allowed.

It became something of a reflex of “the problem” of belief, a problem first identified by Hume, who suggested that particular “operation of the mind” constitutes “one of the greatest
mysteries of philosophy." 4 Bertrand Russell add emphasis, avering in 1921 that “belief … is the central problem in the analysis of mind.”5 It became important to Pierce and Quine, Hartshorne and Wittgenstein.

On another front, the anthropologist E. E. Evans-Pritchard was the first to broach the idea that categories like belief, as with the process of cultural translation in general, may not be able to convey type of spiritual relationships in Zande have, the mystical notions (kwoth) they find supported by their own experience [N 29: a verbal concept of belief does exist in Nuer…ngath; E-P distinguishes faith from belief, tho N does not, no reference]. His student, Rodney Needham, undertook a comprehensive analysis of the idea, and determined that its Indo-European roots made it inadequate to translate concepts and interior experiences from cultures that never saw any need to generate a comparable concept. N Donald Lopez depicts the internalization of belief in the historical circumstances of the Inquisition and its role in cross-cultural obscurantism in the colonial reach of its Christian biases. N Rejecting the conclusions of his disciplinary forebearers, the anthropologist Richard Shweder finds that belief ?? embodies the “faultline”……. (1989). 6 But Rodney Needham’s invaluable analysis of the concept, both philosophically and anthropologically, argued that it could not be restricted to any particular academic disciplines since it “has to do with the fundamental premises of any humane discipline.” 7 Talal Asad’s “genealogy” of religion argue that an critical emphasis on belief as the internal psychology of individuals, (Needham conclusion) enabled marginalization of religion in the modern world. 8 (1998: xvii). In the context of postcolonial literary criticism, Gauri Vivswanathan extends Asad’s argument to the role of conversion, an intense experience for believers, central to the narrative of the modern state as it opposes the emotional subjectivity of minorities to the politics of their civil rights. (?) 9

In one form or another, belief is also prominent on the current landscape of popular life in America. Not confined to secularists, belief has become an explicit problem for many citizens over the last decade in which they have been haunted by acts of Islamist terrorism and polarized

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6 Richard A. Shweder 1989
7 Rodney Needham, Belief, Language and Experience (University of Chicago, 1972), xiv.
by the political influence of the Christian right. In a series of high profile books, the biologist Richard Dawkins decries the “God Delusion”; the philosopher Daniel Dennett seeks to “Break the Spell”; while the ... Christopher Hitchins pulls no punches in decrying the “poison” of belief in the supernatural. Hence the popular press finds belief to be a contentious topic at a time of unprecedented social polarization between so-called believers and atheists. At the same time, however, some postmodern writers suggest that the religious believer/secular atheist dichotomy is effectively transcended. Wayne Proudfoot, eminent philosopher of religion, writes that any conflict between religious belief and scientific concepts is now simply “a naïve misunderstanding” of both. ¹⁰ The philosopher John Caputo more whimsically argues that in this “post-secular” age, religion and science are not opposites, rather “the opposite of a religious person is a loveless person” or a “selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon.” Anyone who loves something madly is evidence of a “religion without religion.”¹¹

Historically, of course, belief has been the focus of analyses of religion stretching from Irenaeus to Karl Rahner, David Hume to Donald Davidson, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith to Slavoj Žižek. To explore the concept of belief from its earliest roots to its modern conundrums would, of course, be an enormous, and therein quite scattered, survey. Sheer semantic spread suggests a few problems inherent to belief in popular usage. For example, the term is used for religious commitment to sacred truths as well as one’s degree of confidence in a weather report or intention to take even a trivial action (that old master of the language, W C Fields’s “Everyone should believe in something. I believe I’ll have another drink.”) This study will simply probe the issues attending belief that seem most relevant to how the study of religion conducts itself today. Its purpose is less systematicity than provocation, that is, it will attempt to indicate all the problems and resources by which to generate a conversation within the study of religion about this most basic of categories.

The goal of this study is not a new theory of belief. Such a project would cement the
reification that is already enshrined in this concept. No, the goal is to contribute to a conversation
about how we think of ourselves (already underway in regard to the category of religion ?????) and
how we think about what we are doing with our inherited interpretive categories. This is a
pragmatic analysis that, in the words of Quine, emulates “the task of making explicit what had
been tacit, and precise what had been vague; of exposing and resolving paradoxes, smoothing
kinks, lopping off vestigial growths, clearing the ontological slums.” (Bauerlein 2, see ff) I hope
to suggest and support the possibility of a new way of speaking about belief that neither so
violates entrench linguistic habits of the world in which we live that it is doomed from the
beginning nor shuns the real work task of heightening heighten awareness that leads to a shift in
the emphasis of certain relationships in this world. Therefore I will not seek to condemn or
advocate a ban on language of belief, however trendy that might seem, but instead aim at
changing where our confidence lies when using it.

Section by section précis
Introduction - "The Problem of Belief"

Any investigation of a topic should begin with an analysis of why that topic warrants one's interest in the first place. In other words, an investigator should understand why the topic constitutes a problem -- for her at least. After all, most scholarly investigations, indeed some of the best, focus on topics that many people do not consider a problem. Further, this analysis of the problem posed by the topic is not a preliminary step but an initial stage of analysis that will permeate subsequent stages. Yet an answer to why the topic constitutes a problem worthy of study is usually not the whole of it, in other words, the reasons to research a topic are usually not the research itself, although why something strikes us as needing to be accounted for often go far to explain how that topic might be more effectively understood.

A personal longstanding reason for a book inquiring into the phenomenon of religious belief is simple. Once I was a believer, thoughtfully and intimately committed, and then I was no longer one, with a different set of thoughts and emotions. While I was able to 'explain' my believing and my not-believing in the popular Freudian patois of the day, I wanted to understand more fully what had happened and why and whether what was true for me is useful for understanding others. These were among the circumstances that led me to the study of religion. But there are also more immediate triggers for this project on belief. For example, my first book addressed ritual and I noted at the time that a full study of religion would demand a corresponding analysis of belief, following the great Durkheim in the simple definition of religion as a matter of beliefs and rites. This definition remains a working, first-level description of religion, so for both scholarly and popular ways of slicing of religion, belief would be a natural topic to follow work on ritual. Another spur to engage the topic in some way lay in the realization that my discipline, the history of religions, has given short shrift to the whole issue of belief even as it remains a major purveyor of the term. The Encyclopedia of Religion, in both first and second editions, fails to include a discrete entry for such a basic concept. The oversight, if it is that, was greatly redressed with Donald S. Lopez's 1998 essay on belief in Mark Taylor's Critical Terms for the Study of Religion, to which this study will constantly refer. Taking these motivating circumstances together, one might conclude that I will understand belief to be an

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essential yet too easily ignored topic in the study of religion. Yet question about the way in which it might be essential to investigating religion as ethnomethodological phenomenon or analytic concept is probably more accurate. The fact that belief – especially the irrationality of having it – has become the focus of a recent spurt of publications by scientists, philosophers, and cultural critics may make any study of terms a useful exercise. The increase in the potential stakes for religion that this extra public attention brings is not further motivation for this book, but it might be the salvation of what feels at this stage to be a quixotic foray into a very live minefield.

Questions about personal experience with belief as well questions about how it should be approached loom over the study of religion generally. And together these concerns replicate familiar stances rooted in the secular Enlightenment. The secular scholar inquiring into belief, a task imagined by the scholar more than the believer, must fear acting the part of an Enlightenment homunculus. Further, to stand in the position of a non-believing secularist is, we know, to look at religion from a very particular perspective, one that may seem very foreign to the practitioner’s self-consciousness. So any answers I might entertain to my questions about belief might constitute answers only from some angles not others, and perhaps not to believers. With that awareness, Enlightenment constraints on the questions it allows become as clear as the liberties it affords.

Today awareness of the historically provisional nature of any such secular questioning is routinely considered part of the ‘problem’ identified with the topic. As an individual scholar with the training generally expected of an academician I share a perspective with other disciplinary approaches the distinctive biases which we are not expected to transcend, but we are certainly encouraged to explore. When such biases are made the subject of scrutiny they can lead the investigator in circles of self-examination. … The compensation, adequate or inadequate, depends on where the study locates its dominant bias, as in the bias of secularism, defined as ‘not including’ or ‘opposed to’ religion, or the bias of colonialism, argued to propagate distortions deriving from one culture’s assumptions about belief.

The ambitious goal of this book is, simultaneously, to identify the bias that casts religious belief as a problem, to analyze how constructions of belief have governed our studies of religion, and to propose a way to enable ingrained linguistic patterns to lead to translations of a wider variety of experience than such patterns have generally allowed.
I am certainly not the first/alone? in the last few decades to isolate the idea of belief and find it a problem. It has been consistently approached that way in various disciplines and even something of a reflex for some scholars to speak of ‘the problem of belief,’ even to see this problem as central to scholarship or the cultural-political landscape itself. In philosophy, any number of scholarly efforts continue with the emphasis proposed by Hume, that belief as an ‘operation of the mind’ constitutes ‘one of the greatest mysteries of philosophy.’ 3 Bertrand Russell suggested in 1921 that “belief ... is the central problem in the analysis of mind.”4 The anthropologist Richard Shweder, who inherits an articulate tradition of concern about the language of belief, finds that belief ?? embodies the “faultline”…… (1989). 5 But Rodney Needham’s invaluable analysis of the concept, both philosophically and anthropologically, argued that it could not be restricted to any particular academic disciplines since it “has to do with the fundamental premises of any humane discipline.”6 Talal Asad’s “genealogy” of religion argue that an critical emphasis on belief as the internal psychology of individuals, (Needham conclusion) enabled marginalization of religion in the modern world.7 (1998: xvii). In the context of postcolonial literary criticism, Gauri Viswanathan extends Asad’s argument to the role of conversion, an intense experience for believers, central to the narrative of the modern state as it opposes the emotional subjectivity of minorities to the politics of their civil rights. (?)8

In one form or another, belief is also prominent on the current landscape of popular life in America. Not confined to secularists, belief has become an explicit problem for many citizens over the last decade in which they have been haunted by acts of Islamist terrorism and polarized by the political influence of the Christian right. In a series of high profile books, the biologist Richard Dawkins decries the “God Delusion”; the philosopher Daniel Dennett seeks to “Break the Spell”; while the .... Christopher Hitchins pulls no punches in decrying the “poison” of belief in the supernatural. Hence the popular press finds belief to be a contentious topic at a time of unprecedented social polarization between so-called believers and atheists. At the same time, however, some postmodern writers suggest that the religious believer/secular atheist dichotomy

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5 Richard A. Shweder 1989
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is effectively transcended. Wayne Proudfoot, eminent philosopher of religion, writes that any conflict between religious belief and scientific concepts is now simply “a naïve misunderstanding” of both.⁹ The philosopher John Caputo more whimsically argues that in this “post-secular” age, religion and science are not opposites, rather “the opposite of a religious person is a loveless person” or a “selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon.” Anyone who loves something madly is evidence of a “religion without religion.”¹⁰

Historically, of course, belief has been the focus of analyses of religion stretching from Irenaeus to Karl Rahner, David Hume to Donald Davidson, and Wilfred Cantwell Smith to Slavoj Žižek. To explore the concept of belief from its earliest roots to its modern conundrums would, of course, be an enormous, and therein quite scattered, survey. Sheer semantic spread suggests a few problems inherent to belief in popular usage. For example, the term is used for religious commitment to sacred truths as well as one’s degree of confidence in a weather report or intention to take even a trivial action (that old master of the language, W C Fields’s “Everyone should believe in something. I believe I’ll have another drink.) This study will simply probe the issues attending belief that seem most relevant to how the study of religion conducts itself today. Its purpose is less systematicity than provocation, that is, it will attempt to indicate all the problems and resources by which to generate a conversation within the study of religion about this most basic of categories.

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Chapter One. The Problem of Universality

Lopez: Belief = historical and cultural Christian particularity
Discuss the evidence for the liberal assumption of universality, seen in Huston Smith, missionary history....

Role of emphasis of symbol in anthropology and HR’s Eliade. (Asad?)

First to suggest that the assumption that everyone believes something is a holdover from Christianity? Who? Hume? Evans-Pritchard
religious person is a loveless person” or a “selfish and pusillanimous curmudgeon”; anyone who loves something madly is evidence of a “religion without religion,” in one form or another, belief is a prominent on the current cultural landscape.

Even prior to this disorienting decade, it was something of a reflex for some scholars to speak of “the problem of belief,” especially philosophers and anthropologists. Naturally there is no single sense in which they all found the idea problematic. It is not even true that only so-called secularists perceived a problem with the concept. Sheer semantic spread suggests a few problems inherent to belief in popular usage. For example, the term is used for religious commitment to sacred truths as well as one’s degree of confidence in the reliability of a weather report. Some of the dilemma is caught in a line attributed to that old master of the language, W. C. Fields: “Everyone should believe in something. I believe I’ll have another drink.”

Historically, of course, belief has been the focus of analyses of religion stretching from Irenaeus to Karl Rahner, David Hume to Donald Davidson, and Wilfred Cantwell-Smith to Slavoj Žižek. To explore the concept of belief from its earliest roots to its modern conundrums would, of course, be an enormous, and therein quite scattered, survey. Such a project is not the purpose of this study. Rather, I shall simply probe the issues that seem most relevant to how the study of religion conducts itself today. This inquiry is meant to be more systematic than some of its immediate precursors, but no less focused that they on generating a conversation within the study of religion about this most basic of categories. Needham signals the challenge, considering it not only a topic unrestricted to particular academic disciplines, it also “has to do with fundamental premises of any humane discipline.” (xiv)

The Problem of Universality

A discrete number of scholars have struggled with the nature and distribution, both historical and culturally, of belief. While the nature of belief as a problem may appear straight-forward, it is

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actually approach quite distinctly for all. The most salient parts of their arguments are an
inescapable way of demonstrating a broad dissatisfaction with the implications of universality –
that all people can believe and do so in the same way -- easily attributed to the term.

A review of the literature, recent, reveals very similar concerns. On the one hand, there are
philosophical concerns rising from an analysis of language and communication: Wittgenstein
was particularly straightforward, wondering if believing was an interior experience, and whether
it was constituting by the thinking component or the doing. Other philosophers .... culminating
in Donald Davidson (see Frankenberry) who explicitly argues for the universality of believing as
the basis for communication (??). On the other hand, a body of more ethnographically-oriented
studies looks at the meaning of belief in cross-cultural communication and representation. It is
mostly this second group that addresses religious behavior. And they generally question three
assumptions about belief, namely that belief is universal, that it is a mental state, and therefore
that it is the personal experience of the individual. In questioning these categories, particularly
the first, studies have stressed examples that demonstrate the particularity of belief (location in
specific times and places; instability of meaning over time). References have also suggested that
believing may be better thought of residing in doing rather than thinking and that a persistent
sociocultural dimension to belief negates a focus on the psychological experience of the
individual.

The challenge to universality primarily rests on the apparent misapplication of the term to the
relationship that people in tradition societies have to their gods. Needham opens his study with
the experience of the impossibility of rendering “I believe in God” in Penan. Likewise Evans
Pritchard is loath to describe Azande feelings about …. with belief. Lopez takes the case furthest
showing how use of the category was a colonial distortion of indigenous culture. None of these
studies makes a formal point that traditional societies as some sort of group are not well served
by representing their relations to or thoughts about their deities in terms of belief; nor do these
studies conclude that non-traditional – e.g., modern, industrial, dominating – societies do have
religions in which belief is an appropriate term. To make these points begs many questions, such
as exactly what do you mean by belief, other than it is a Christian term? do all so-called modern
and traditional societies fall neatly on either side of the belief/non-belief divide? The French anthropologist Jean Pouillon has dealt with these issues most theoretically and succinctly...

Several scholars have explicitly attempted to describe what it means to believe, namely de Certeau, Veyne and Izutsu – usually in route to another goal.

The consistent reaction of ethnographers against use of the term is part of a new sensitivity to the distortions possible in translation and to fundamental differences in cultural constructions of religious cosmologies and divine interactions. Not new in the sense that only postmodern scholars of the late 1990s evidence this sensitivity. E-P writes in the 1930s. This sensitivity is new with regard to an earlier quandary in anthropological assimilation of diverse cultures. It was once asked if tribal, traditional societies actually had religion as such, since what they had appeared to differ substantively from religion as it was extrapolated from the Christian experience. The weight of history shifted to favor an expansion of the term to include more types of religiosity than ever before, with a simultaneous theorizing on the nature of religion beyond the historical conditioning of Christianity. David Chidester for one notes how long it took for Africans to be deemed religious, that is, as possessing religion. Accepting the wide use of the term religion, the next stage of collective concern about categories was reluctant to apply such a Christianized category as belief, or to de-christianize the category sufficiently starting either with a theoretical redefinition or by simply flooding/inflating the category with new examples. These latter efforts do appear in some works: Southwold writing on belief in Sri Lankan Buddhism works to refine the category as well as the religious activities in question so that he can include them as believers; the medieval historian Philip Arnold wants to recognize multiple mode of religiosity (specifically popular religion) that had long been deemed un-Christian as sincere sources of belief; not tampering with the nature of belief as a category, he suggests the belief-like nature of these popular religious arts and the vacuity of the historical criteria used to determine what counted.
While Hume is a natural place to start because of his exterior and critical position in trying to explain religion, but there is not an unbroken line of scholars so much as a question that had kept popping up. Hume is a resource for latter investigators, but their projects often differed the questions about belief per se have been considerably similar. In A Treatise of Human Nature (1739-40), Hume writes that belief as “an act of mind has never yet been explained by any philosopher.” (1888: 97n, edited ed.) Moreover, “this operation of mind, which forms the belief of any fact, seems hitherto to have been one of the greatest mysteries of philosophy” (Hume, 1888, p. 628) (Needham, p. 7 for Hume quotes).

When Durkheim broke religion down into the components beliefs and rites, he effectively established the basic sociological ‘fact’ that the supposed universality of religion extends to each of its constituitive elements. Was Durkheim influenced by the overlooked history of belief as an elemental and explicitly universal Christian category? Not long after Durkheim, but in another world of face-to-face ethnographic encounters, E.E. Evans-Pritchard weighted the ability of the term to translate Azande religious ideas. For E-P the Christian assumptions behind the term made it a distorting lens through which to get a true picture of ....

Features of the Christianization (does not predate Christianity?) of belief: universal, mental or interiority (not practice/performative), and therefore individual (not social). Does not have to be real early Christian understanding, just what critics ascribed to it as Christian features.

[Durkheim] on beliefs in more primitive forms of religion: find how he uses it as universal, mental and individual...

Evans-Prichard ‘30s (see Needham too)

Rodney Needham ‘70s

Needham opens his book with two questions that drive the comparative ethnographic investigation he launches, recasting Wittgenstein’s questions “is belief an experience” in more anthrological terms, he asks whether “the capacity for belief constitutes a natural resemblance
among men" so as to require it be considered as a “human” faculty. (xiii) In other words, for his analysis, belief is tested as to whether it is a matter of a psychological state or experience, and if so does it take the form of an individual interiority or social constructed collective representations, or both. And in any of these forms is belief not universally human. He finds quite diverse ethnographic and analytic accounts have relied on the term. If Malcolm Ruel 80s?

Pouillan 80s?

Lopez
a) Main problems identified: Universal or particular; mental or performative; private or social. This is the supposed universality given Christian assumptions; the problem of implied individual/private existence, as well as the historical, political cultural “social fact.”

b) Many (all anthrop?) declare they cannot use the term (Ruel, Pouillan, Needham, Wulff, Lopez), tho others have productively done so (Southwold, Arnold, phil of rel ...?, ). Engelke and what-‘s-her-name?

c) History of religions/rel studies has not examined its use; in fact, it appears to deny its importance per se, but such unexamined assumptions can be very misleading, ill serving (leaving our discourse more theological?). Unexamined use of the term does make arguments rest on inherently theological (or about theology) grounds (distance from or ally with Wiebe?):

-- historical exp of Christian credo formulation
-- faith rooted in individual experience [cp ‘science’ explaining cognitive/biology of belief]
-- ignoring how belief is used ethnically, politically, role of polls (census already noted); Viswanathan, Lilla, etc
-- Theorization of belief in theology (Reckwitz)

d) The problems resulting from or just accompanying the current particularism (when a theological-universal is rejected for particularistic; eg Needham; Evans Pritchard, etc) and post-colonial analysis (Lopez); benefits of particularism too, of course! Namely,

-- the subtle reintroduction of universalist assumptions endemic to any posturing of “study.” Need to grapple with that!
-- ramifications for any definition of “religion” and methods for its study, e.g. religious studies

[“Religion”: Paradigms plus: use Chidester on West slow to call others’ “religion”; also add JZS to argument about Christianity as prototype (see Guide to SofRel 41, Drugery 90) and his world religions research (before Masuzawa) Guide 11-42, Map 295?, Harvard Theo Rev ’96:295-6.]
e) Practice theory: value of a focus on believing and construction of a focus on practice; later look at multiple examples of believing from a comparative practice stance…
Challenging the Category of Belief

Universalism/particularism
The literature as a whole contains a two-stage critique of the category of belief, with linguistic/semantic scribbles about the terminology at both stages. At the outset there is the argument that this "universalizing" category cannot apply to those societies that do not formulate what they 'do' in concepts or reified in representations as Christianity has always done. The Christian baggage attending the concept of belief comes from its original and on-going context of religious diversity and contestation in which concepts or representations were clearly articulated (doctrines and creeds being the finished products) so as to define the precise object of belief and, by the same exercise, those objects of disbelief. Examples of this anti-universal particularism are the arguments by Donald Lopez, Rodney Needham, E.E. Evans-Pritchard, Martin Southwold, and Jean Pouillon, etc. They ultimately imply the minimal integrity of nothing more than thick description (with any categories?), challenging basic assumptions in the meta-narratives of anthropology.

Belief/disbelief and science/religion
At a second stage, the context of diversity and contestation is seen as so intrinsic to the concept of belief that the concept forever carries the ambiguity of its own negation (what is formulated as that which is believed clearly implies that is can also be rejected, in disbelief), lodging the experience of doubt within the imagination of every believer. The possibility of doubt creates the demand for complete commitment and practices of constant affirmation; some analyses find that believers' belief/commitment sets up a type of contractual relationship with the deity in which the believer expects a return on the commitment. Generally, however, it is argued that social scientist inevitably cast believers as the irrational other; moreover, the context of diversity and contestation leaves no position that is not a position of belief and disbelief, including science and political ideologies which demand their own types of commitments in turn. From this perspective, and others too, science and religion are meta-phenomena that effectively define each other by the beliefs and disbeliefs to which they commit. Not able to recognize this defining relationship, it is argued, social scientists by their own self-definitions attempt to grasp what they will be unable to grasp (until they allow true self-knowledge?), namely, the 'other' of religious belief which is not other, or the rationality of religious practice; so they persist in the ascription of beliefs to the other that are what they imagine they would believe if they were not unbelievers. In other words, religious belief is not grasped in its own rationality, on its own terms, only in the language of negating assumptions of those who define themselves by their disbelief. Strands of this argument are found in Jean Pouillon, Micheal deCerteau, Susan Harding...

My generation of scholars was probably the last in which the majority had some first hand experience of religion. As believers turned disbelievers, we created as social science very concerned to maintain the boundaries. (E.g., the field of religious studies is not theological, it is the objective study of religion as a social and psychological phenomenon....). Increasingly social scientists are people with no prior experience of religion, to whom the boundary is clear but just asking to be transgressed.... They are able to be more than participant-observers: instead of translating the experience of the other, they put themselves in the shoes of the other and then translate their own experiences back.
Universal argument and counterargument = assumptions of the universality of belief (more or less) in contrast to arguments for its culture-laden provinciality/limitations. The latter extended into a fear that its use is a distortion, easily promoted by the interests of colonialism.

Evidence for universality of a term like belief is thin at best. Arguments against it are limited but compelling. However, the whole collision of views (not a debate!) evokes the issue of the status of analytical language.

Can folk categories ever be used? Refined for use? Is an analytical language (just terms that are constantly challenged?) desirable? If not, we can learn about each other only on a very limited way, since even to describe the culture of others, one needs to use culture-laden terms.

Those terms can be ‘refined’ by purposive historical and linguistic analysis BUT could end up with a set of terms far removed from standard use and thus a very esoteric discipline. Or terms can be refined, at least to some degree, simply be constant extensions of their use, as when cross-cultural interactions appropriate religion to cover practices that might not have figured in any more original sense of the term.

Terms are never frozen in history. They carry their history but they are not always passive to that history. When a term is adopted as a useful analytical term, all limitations noted, it continues its history.

Analytically languages run twin dangers: adhering too closely to folk meanings and become too far divorced from them. Fears of the hegemonic ambitions of an analytical language can be overstated, but not always, and surely the unwittingly, if colonially useful, effects are many.
The problem of belief, as it is discussed in philosophy and anthropology, involves understanding the linguistic and epistemological role of belief, as opposed to academic arguments. American culture is experiencing a confrontational relationship between the post-Enlightenment tension between belief and reason. There are the secular challenges to most secular culture, and some horrific changes have been. They are apparent to all, for another drama-the followers of evolution versus the proponents of intelligent design. In regard to the science curriculum, belief and reason.
Tentative Contents

NEH proposal

PUP Proposal?

JZS Festschrift

History and Theory on Paradigms

SOAS revisions?

Marker for printed article “Chinese Believe in Spirits”

Oxford Talk on Declensions of a Problem

UCB Talk on Belief and Lopez challenge

Notes on Prayer

Notes on Tomoko’s chapter on Cognition in the Study of Religion
America is a nation of “believers,” we are told by one poll after another. The beliefs about which the population is polled conflate doctrinal tenets about the Bible with political positions on abortion and social views about the family. Since the emergence of the evangelical right in politics, the language of belief has become central to political discourse and, increasingly, social analysis. However, going back further in history to the Scopes trial, it is clear that “belief” — or not — then and there became central to the main forms of American identity.

Over the last ten years, a new wave of studies addressing ‘belief’ has appeared, a rich if often ragtag collection earnestly pulling in predictably contrary directions. Some studies don the mantle of traditional rationalism, explaining with horror or studied sympathy the unnatural persistence of religious or truly “weird” beliefs; others take up the guise of historical, social or postmodern examinations of the cultural, even economic, factors behind the dynamics of belief and unbelief. Despite the magnitude of the current fray, scholars of religion, specifically historians of religions, have not been effective contributors to the conversation. Apparently preceding generations of religion scholars conceded the idea of belief to theology, which would be in keeping with their efforts to distance the study of religion from the theological world in which it was born. So, for example, the 1986 and 2005 editions of the magisterial ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGION, first edited by Mircea Eliade, one of the main figures in the History of Religions, do not even carry an entry for “belief.” The reader is referred to “Doubt (and belief)” for an uncompromisingly specific theological discussion. Although the concept was then influentially deconstructed to its Christian roots (Lopez 1998), the term is widely used in every monograph in the field and related fields. Historians of religion do not know how to analyze the issue of belief as a working idea.

My project will first analyze the manner in which the concept of belief is currently addressed in order to demonstrate both a personal thesis about how to modify our concept of believing as well as a revised theoretical basis for doing so. I judge that the latter will encourage historians of religion to pursue methodologically coherent historical and cultural studies of the phenomenon—especially if they disagree with the former thesis. That thesis will center on the question of the relative value of defining belief in terms more universal than its Christian origins or defining it as a particularity of performance that cannot be presumed beyond the sphere of Christian influence. Ultimately, current uses of the term appear to require both approaches.

During my current sabbatical leave I planned the larger project and began the research. Given the enormity of the written sources pertaining to belief, this has been an exercise in determining which areas I must address and which I can avoid due to their more secondary, and all-consuming, nature (e.g., analytic philosophy). A published article, developed at a small
weekend conference with Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, Maurice Bloch, Terry Godlove, Jonathan Z. Smith and several others, helped me clarify how to use the rich store of analytical philosophy on belief/truth statements, such as pursued by Donald Davidson (Frankenberry, 2002). A more recent paper to appear in HISTORY AND THEORY contains an analysis of the construction of “religion” by Christian Euro-American culture that will be the groundwork for the rest of the project. The work I have done on cognitive theory, economic analyses, historical studies, and methodological analyses now enable me to shape a mature project and hazard a thesis.

I have worked for over twenty years with the larger issues of how to think about religion, which Durkheim defined so simply as a matter of rites and beliefs. My work on ritual theory is, of course, the best evidence of my qualifications to wade into this companion issue. My reputation is primarily based on my theoretical contributions to understanding ritual and religion, and I am constantly learning that this work has been picked up in other disciplines, most recently, history, classics, and archeology. My Sinological work exploring aspects of the "medium" in the message of Chinese religious texts, the topic of an earlier NEH grant, is also important preparation for the more material dimensions of how and what people believe. While drawing on this broad background in research, and years of teaching, I plan to refine my understanding of particular topics (e.g., the "will to believe," according to Nietzsche and Wm James) and broaden my grasp of some very recent developments (cognitive theory). However, I want this study of belief to return to themes that the history of religions has ignored since the rise of Eliade’s phenomenology of religion, namely, the highly materialistic concerns long associated with religion in its so-called “primitive” forms—the quest for health, wealth, and life after death. Hence, my study aims not only to sort through the crowd of conflicting current work, and develop a methodological framework and thesis addressing the phenomenon of believing, it also intends to bring back into formal consideration the easily observable events in which a congregation prays for money, expects healings, or communicates with those on the other side. At some point, as the discipline increasingly focused on so-called “world religions” (Masuzawa 2005), we let these ways of being religious fall from consideration. Anthropology has been better at seeing them in religions abroad, while sociology has been better at tracking the middle-class search for spirituality.

I expect to spend the year completing my research in the areas noted below as well as fully drafting the most critical formulations and major thesis. The book will be finalized in a second year. In conversations with religion editors at Oxford and Princeton University presses, I have described this as a two-year project; due to the reputation of my previous work (and continued sales), each has pressed me on the manuscript. They also urged me to keep it accessible to the general reader. The success of Karen Armstrong’s books make clear that an educated readership is hungry to understand religion better and they appreciate the association between our religious history and the current international environment. While my first book on ritual (1992) would not be considered generally accessible, even though it has been assigned to undergraduates, my second book was deliberately written in a more straightforward style. This “belief” project crystallized in the wake of the last two presidential elections, so I am intent on writing a book that can address both my colleagues in academe and the educated reader. But most of all, I want to do what I think I do best, namely, open up an area theoretically, inviting all comers to take the discussion further.

My particular strength in dealing with theory has made my work both distinctive and directly challenging to studies that have reigned in the field of history of religions. My rethinking of ritual overturned the supremacy, if not the enduring utility, of Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz,
and Jonathan Z. Smith on the topic of ritual. Likewise, by building on Donald Lopez’s influential deconstruction of our historical assumptions about belief, I expect to establish fresh ground on which to re-engage both the concept and the phenomenon we now mean to define with it. A study that redefines religion through an analysis of the overly familiar features of belief will contribute to the general discourse with which we discuss politics, values, and human diversity.

This is an ambitious statement. I make it with a humility born of long experience in projects that never go in the direction one expects. At present it is, of course, an objective and an aspiration, but it is one that I believe I have the experience to pursue—and even presume in this description. In its scope this project is in keeping with the editor’s call in the March 2006 issue of the JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION asking the field to "not just produce more disconnected, atomistic goblets of knowledge, leaving their "implications untouched." (74:5) My hope to contribute beyond religious studies may not be unrealistic. I have been invited to participate in two events that show the interest of other areas, a Classics seminar at Oxford University on "faith" and a Sociology conference on "prayer" at Princeton University.

Aside from those events, I do not plan any travel. Languages are not an obstacle and I expect to draw on my familiarity with texts in Chinese popular religion. Beyond the excellent interlibrary loan services at my institution, I can use the nearby libraries at Stanford and Berkeley. Finally, the book is currently sketched out in chapters that are likely to slim down as my thesis takes on a more precise formulation. The following is a tentative table of contents:

I. Introduction: Praying for wealth, expecting the “last days,” thanking God that you were spared when others were not – the questions raised by these familiar scenarios are a place to begin in looking at what and how people believe affects the study of religion. 

II. How Christians Came to Believe and Found Other Religions Believe Also (Don’t They?)—locating “belief” in enduring Christian paradigms of religion; the fundamental challenge of non-Christian “belief systems”

III. What about Truth? Current Arguments concerning “Belief”

A. Traditional Rationalism—contrasting belief with the mindset of empirical proof; the Aristotelian heritage in Biblical studies; Enlightenment naturalism; American pragmatism; philosophy on belief statements and truth claims; the cultural context of scientific realism since Darwin; rational choice theory; the therapeutic psychology of belief

B. The Rationalism of Cognitive Theory—evolutionary speculation; psychology of religious experience; neurological theories of the naturalness of belief; studies of the counter-intuitive

C. Socio-Culturalism—the fate of classic theories; explorations of social memory; historical studies of power relations in belief/truth; postmodern critiques of belief and how religious studies pose its questions.

IV. The Critical Question: Is Believing a Form of Universal Cognition or a Culturally Particular Performative Action?—returning to the oldest and widely shared dimensions of religion, namely, praying for health, wealth and life after death; community and morality; individual and social frames; the perception of religious similarities and differences

V. Believing: a cultural way of thinking about a universal cognitive activity occurring in performative practices in which a cosmology and a social identity is acted/constructed through formulas of word and deed; the dynamics of believing in religion, science, the marginal, hope; analytic language for talking about beliefs one does not share
Preface

As she was approaching ninety years of age, my mother began to talk more directly about God, what she believed, and whether she would be found wanting. As the child who studied religion, I got all her hard questions. Invariably, however, she would structure the conversation around the same points and what I had to say, whether challenging or soothing, never really mattered. “I’m not sure I believe or not. I certainly don’t think it’s likely there’s the sort of God I was ever taught to believe in. It’s hard to believe there is a God who cares about us. All I can do is hope that if God exists, he’ll accept that I tried to understand and that I tried to live a good life -- that I did what I could.” My mother did not want a theological response and she certainly had no use for the historical or comparative framing. She was trying to make things right, work out who she had been, in her own estimation, clarify what she could believe and what she was not comfortable invoking even at this late moment in her life. She inevitably wanted the comfort of being true to herself and, naturally, being on the right side of God should he exist. After all, she was sort of a believer “in her own way.” She would begin and end these predominantly one-sided discussions with some simple questions: “Am I a believer or not? What counts as belief?”

There are many reasons to address the specific, and implied, questions of my mother. This book, however, will not even make the attempt. This book is something quite different, limited and, from my mother’s perspective, hopelessly abstract. I would not presume to discuss topics for which I have no particular qualifications -- or track record of useful contributions. Yet I take up the topic of belief, in my own way, quite aware that for many people questions about belief are very personal and complicated. Hopefully, my more impersonal perspective confined to scholarly discussions does not lose sight of this. I decided to address the phenomenon of believing for several reasons, none of them quite so clearly distinct in my motivation as I can make them on paper. In the wake of my earlier work on ritual, I was reminded of a challenge to myself contained in the opening page of my first book on thinking about ritual, namely, to return some day to consider how the other component of religion identified in the simple Durkheimian definition of religion might yield to an analysis similar to the one in that work. Pursuing this, another reason for this book emerged: the surprising paucity of attention to this ubiquitous topic or category or phenomenon by scholars of religion. Some discussions exist -- counting on one hand, a finger or two is left over – and they will be fully mined here. But they are quite polemical and often
limited in scope, rarely invoking the more expansive treatments of the topic in related disciplines of anthropology, history, and philosophy. Finally, the silliness of the recent public positions staked out by well-known writers and some eminent scholars, fully convinced of the obvious rationality of their own reasoning, are the mere top of a scholarly food chain. The new rationalism, however, better represented by many more careful studies in the fast-paced flourishing of what has come to be grouped as “cognitive theory,” may overfill the void with its own distinctive manner of defining (away) the topic.

There are more general reasons to inquire into our ideas about believing. At a time when European and American confidence in the exorable spread of secular modernity is giving way to a new examination of the assumptions underlying that self-interested ideology of Europe and America, the door has opened to take religious beliefs more seriously. Religious strife, since that is the form in which society generally notices religion, appears today not simply as another form of class struggle, colonial liberation, or resistance to modernization. Rather, there is a bit of a general consensus forming that ideas matter, cultures matter, religion matters. At the same time, the insights of postmodernist and postcolonial studies leave scholars of religion unable to pass through that door, let alone widen it or explain what is on the other side, due to our resistance to essentializing those large entities such as Islam and global Christian evangelicalism of current discourse. We are effectively sidelined for the very current discussion to which we might actually be relevant. We may also be hesitant to join in any general discussion of ‘beliefs’ per se due to the decades of scholarship on the body and embodiment or performance and practice, as well as the highly nuanced discussions of what were once cruder debates about oral versus literate cultures, or tribal versus creedal religions.

These reasons for attempting a book on the huge and amorphous topic of belief lead me to try to impose some order on our resources for addressing it. This book does have a thesis; while clear, it is, in the spirit of the age, a bit of an anti-thesis: affirming this, problematizing that, ultimately suggesting a shift of perspective to afford a reasonable, and effective, way to deal with competing scholarly goals.
America is a nation of “believers,” we are told by one poll after another. The beliefs about which the population is polled conflate doctrinal tenets about the bible, with political positions on abortion and social views about the family. Since the emergence of the evangelical right in politics, the language of belief has become central to political discourse and, increasingly, social analysis. However, going back further in history to the Scopes trial, it is clear that “belief” – or not – then and there became central to the main forms of American identity.

Over the last ten years, a new wave of studies addressing ‘belief’ has appeared, a rich if often ragtag collection earnestly pulling in predictably contrary directions. Some studies don the mantle of traditional rationalism, explaining with horror or studied sympathy the unnatural persistence of mild and extreme beliefs; others take up the guise of historical, social or postmodern examinations of the cultural, even economic, factors behind the dynamics of belief and unbelief. Despite the magnitude of the current fray, scholars of religion, specifically historians of religions, have not been effective contributors to any part of the conversation. Apparently the preceding generation of religion scholars ceded the idea of belief to the realm of theology; that would be in keeping with their efforts to keep distancing the study of religion from the theological world in which it was born. So, for example, the 1986 and 2005 editions of the magisterial ENCYCLOPEDIA OF RELIGION, first edited by Mircea Eliade, one of the main figures in the History of Religions, do not even carry an entry for “belief.” The reader is referred to “Doubt (and belief)” for an uncompromisingly narrow, theological discussion. Historians of religion do not know how to address the issue of belief. Although formally ceded to theology and influentially deconstructed to its Christian roots, the term is still widely used in every monograph in the field and related fields where the problems are noted but not resolved.

My project will first analyze the manner in which the concept of belief is currently addressed in order to demonstrate both a personal thesis about how to modify our concept of belief as well as a revised theoretical basis for doing so. I think that latter will encourage historians of religion to pursue methodologically coherent historical and cultural studies of the phenomenon, especially if they disagree with the thesis. The thesis of the project will center, I believe, on the question of the relative value of defining belief in terms more universal than its Christian origins or defining it as a particularity of performance that cannot be presumed beyond the sphere of Christian influence. Ultimately, current uses of the term require both.

During recent sabbatical leaves I planned the larger project and began the research. Given the enormity of the written sources pertaining to belief, this has been an exercise in determining which areas I can address and which I can avoid due to their more secondary, if all-consuming, nature (e.g., analytic philosophy). A published article, developed at a small weekend conference with Richard Rorty, Jeffrey Stout, Maurice Bloch, Terry Godlove, Jonathan Z Smith and several others, helped me clarify the logic for avoiding the rich store of analytical philosophy on belief/truth statements, such as pursued by David Davidson (Frankenberry, 2002). A paper to
appear in *History and Theory* contains an analysis of the construction of ‘religion’ by Christian Euro-American culture that will be the groundwork for the rest of the project. Work I have done on cognitive theory, economic analyses, historical studies, and methodological critiques of the field of religious studies now enable me to shape the project and hazard a rough thesis.

I have worked for over twenty years with the larger issues of how to think about religion, which Durkheim defined so simply as a matter of rites and beliefs. My work on ritual theory is, of course, the best evidence of my qualifications to wade into this companion issue. My reputation is primarily based on my theoretical contributions to understanding ritual and religion, and I am constantly learning that this work has been picked up in other disciplines, most recently, history, classics and archeology. My Sinological work exploring aspects of the "medium" in the message of Chinese religious texts, the topic of an earlier NEH grant, is also important preparation for the more material dimensions of how and what people believe. While drawing on this broad background in research, and years of teaching, I plan to refine my understanding of particular topics (e.g., the "will to believe," according to Nietzsche and William James) and broaden my grasp of some very recent developments (cognitive theory). However, I want this study of belief to return to themes that the study of religion has ignored since the rise of Eliade’s phenomenology of religion, namely, the highly materialistic concerns long associated with religion in its so-called “primitive” forms—the quest for health, wealth, and life after death. Hence, my study aims not only to sort through a crowded and conflicting set of current work, and develop a methodological framework and thesis addressing the phenomenon of belief, it also intends to bring back into formal consideration the easily observable events in which a congregation prays for money, expects healings, or communicates with those on the other side. At some point, as the discipline increasingly focused on “world religions” (see Masuzawa), we let these ways of being religious fall from consideration. Anthropology has been better at seeing them in religions abroad, while sociology has been better at tracking the middle-class search for spirituality.

I expect to spend the year completing my research in the areas noted below as well as fully drafting the critical formulations and major thesis. The book will be finalized in a second year. In conversations with the religion editors at Oxford and Princeton University presses, I have described this as a two-year project; due to the reputation of my previous work (and continued sales), each pressed me to offer the manuscript to their press. They also urged me to keep the manuscript accessible to the general reader. It is clear from the success of Karen Armstrong’s books that an educated readership is hungry to understand religion better and they appreciate the association between our religious history and the current international environment. While my first book on ritual (1992) would not be considered generally accessible, even though it has been assigned to undergraduates, my second book was deliberately written in a more straightforward style. This “belief” project crystallized in the wake of the last two presidential elections, so I am intent on writing a book that can address both my colleagues in academe and the educated reader. But most of all, I want to do what I think I do best, namely, open up an area theoretically, inviting all sorts of readers to take the discussion further.

My particular strength in dealing with theory has made my work both distinctive and directly challenging to studies that have reigned in the field of history of religions. My rethinking of ritual overturned the supremacy, but not the enduring utility, of Victor Turner, Clifford Geertz,
and Jonathan Z. Smith on the topic of ritual. Likewise, by building on Donald Lopez's influential deconstruction of our many assumptions about belief, I expect to establish fresh ground on which to re-engage both the concept and the phenomenon we mean to define with it. A study that redefines religion through an analysis of the overly familiar feature of belief will contribute to the general discourse with which we discuss politics, values, and human diversity. This is an ambitious statement. I make it with a humility born of long experience in projects that never go in the direction one expects. It is, of course, an objective and an aspiration, but it is one that I believe I have the experience to pursue--and even presume in this description. In its scope this project is in keeping with the editor's call in the March 2006 issue of the JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION, asking the field to "not just produce more disconnected, atomistic goblets of knowledge of knowledge," leaving their "implications untouched." (74:5) Contributions beyond religious studies may not be unrealistic. I have been invited to participate in two events that show the interest of other areas, a Classics seminar at Oxford University on "faith" and a Sociology conference on "prayer" at Princeton University. Aside from these events, I do not plan any travel. Languages are not an obstacle and I expect to draw on my work in Chinese popular religion. Beyond the excellent interlibrary loan services at my institution, Stanford and Berkeley libraries are in my general area and I have used them frequently.

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BELIEVING
Catherine Bell

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Bibliography

Fueled by the recent presidential elections and the longer-standing controversies over teaching evolution and intelligent design, there has been a fresh spate of books on belief and an increase in the venues in which this notion is bandied about. Scholars of religion, however, have practically avoided the term. The latest edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (2005) makes no change in the earlier one's (1986?) omission of a separate entry for belief. The reader is directed to the entry for "Doubt (and Belief)," which is fully theological in its purview and assumptions. Two non-theological attempts to analyze the term (Lopez, "Belief" in Taylor's *Critical Terms for the Study of Religion*, 1998 and Robert Campany's article in *History of Religion*, 2000) suggest that any discussion of the it will quickly break down due to a variety of semantic problems; while Lopez sees no way to overcome these problems, and no particular reason to try, Campany optimistically predicts useful avenues for cross-cultural discourse. However, neither attempts to comes to terms with the way the notion of belief currently functions in the debates of our day, or whether the study of religion is avoiding the term as a way to avoid those same debates or preserve some paradigm.

The field of religious studies has been generated and propelled by a series of paradigms. The most central paradigm for all academic disciplines has been the Enlightenment's distinction between the rational world of empirical study and logical argument versus what they understood as the traditional cosmology of belief in God and acceptance of divine truths on faith alone. This paradigm has been beset, of course, by a number of ambiguities, not least of which is the role played by Biblical Studies in the emergence of European scientific and linguistic scholarship, among other areas, which did so much to bring about the Enlightenment. With reason versus faith (or belief) as the mental infrastructure of the modern world's understanding of science and religion, then postmodernist analyses of the culturalism of the sciences, which demand as much belief from the normal citizen as many of the wares religion offers, present yet another ambiguities underlying the modernist mindset. Cognitive science, relentlessly antagonistic to postmodernism, is still contributing to the project in both positive and negative ways. The work of Pascal Boyer differs greatly from the apocalyptic vision of Roy Rappaport, just as the breezy common-sense style of Justin Barrett differs from the density of McCauley and Lawson's work. Yet the new ways of mapping mental states explored in this scholarship lends continues to approach belief as a way of thinking while blurring the lines by which the mental is opposed to the physical.
The multi-disciplinary scholars of religious studies have more to offer. Aside from the few studies laying some groundwork, religious studies has the various empirical results of specific work in cognitive science, all the work in cultural anthropology, and the potential analytic data on the idea of belief in both popular and theoretical discourse. However, the most exciting material since Malinowski's treatment of religion, magic and science has been several disconnected studies by linguists and anthropologists exploring people's verbal activity in their construction of the social identity of "a believer," most notably Susan Harding's The Book of Jerry Falwell (2001). Since Paul Veyne's Did the Greeks Believe their Myths? (1988) and Paul Connerton's How Societies Remember (1989), anthropologists have also been exploring cultural transmission is ways that also unpack reliance on specific behavioral dynamics, notably architecture as much as oral tales.

I have published one essay to date on this enormous topic (in Nancy Frankenberry's Radical Interpretation [Cambridge, 2002], "The Chinese Believe in Spirits': Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion," which was a paper presented to a small weekend seminar that included Richard Rorty, Maurice Bloch, Jonathan Z. Smith and Jeffery Stout, among others. Since the seminar was predicated on the work of the philosopher Donald Davidson's idea of "radical interpretation," my paper was able to engage the significance of the heavy load of philosophical studies of the verb "to believe" in order to design an approach that considers such philosophizing more as data for cultural study than a history of insights. Since then, I have pushed the project forward in a number of papers, notably a study of paradigms in Religious Studies to be published in History and Theory.

In planning the book manuscript, I am cognizant of the fact that the unexpected success of my first book, Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice (1992), which has been repeatedly cited for its major contribution to the field, was based on redefining the conversation about ritual in two steps. First, I demonstrated why the main theories of ritual (Durkheim, Turner and Geertz) appeared so useful, but were ultimately dead ends due to the circularity with which they played with the polarization of thought and action. Second, I suggested a fresh direction in which ritual was not a fundamentally distinct mode of human activity, but a strategic form of cultural practice like so many others. Its similarity to and its difference from other modes of practice, and the reasons why people would choose to ritualize a situation rather than deal with it another way provided unexpectedly rich ways of describing the ritual practices in their context. [During my years of work on ritual I also studied the ways in which printed Chinese morality books constructed a specific belief system (that is, cosmologically described morality) that was assimilated in a highly diverse culture offering many alternative systemizations.]

The Believing manuscript I am working on begins by tracing the role of the belief concept within the main paradigms constituting the modern study of religion, including the many verbal constructions that use the term in English (notably, W. C. Field's line -- "What do I believe? Well, I believe I'll take a walk."), as well as who and what are served by current uses. For example, Religious Studies depends on a number of interlocking paradigms, such as (i) Christianity is the de facto prototype for all religions, (ii) religion is fundamentally irrational, (iii) there are comparable "world religions," where the
"beliefs" are similarly described, (iv) religion is a cultural necessity, at least with regard to social morality, (v) the idea of religion is just a Western construct, and (vi) and perhaps the most diffuse and persistent, an underlying assumption, based on the foregoing, that religion is intrinsically good (when something awful occurs concerning religion it is usually ascribed to something like extremism or derangement). These paradigms are maintained by the "either/or" political-religious arguments that posit a false clarity between religion and science, on the one hand, and the political-religious agendas based on a false confusion of knowing and believing, on the other. In other words, continued understanding of believing as a mental state weak on real knowing (but perhaps rooted in a fundamentally humanizing experience something greater) serves purposes that must be unraveled to understand the perpetuation of the term. In their support of the preceding paradigms, popular notions of belief do not only support theology and religious studies, as we have known them, they also maintain ideas that are basic to the assumptions about modern science.

In a more positive light, the book will go on to develop a new model for understanding what it means to be a believer. I do not care to reject popular usage for some esoteric terminology; on the contrary, popular usage is more of a guide than theory. However, I do want to provide scholars with an approach to the idea, and its history, that gives them a more analytic, if less participatory, basis for study. My approach will analyze "believing" as an active, performative practice of social identification—not primarily a private, mental state of commitment to religious ideas. There is sufficient data available to be used creatively in this regard, particularly in developing the idea of "social identification" in a broader sense that mere group belonging. Going beyond Durkheim, therefore, I want to focus primarily on the main ways people demonstrate or act out belief to themselves and others, which involve a modest set of linguistic and performative actions that tend to revolve around particularly basic human concerns (not theological abstractions): concern with the dead, insuring the health and well-being of the living; and the desire to seek greater wealth by virtue of demonstrating religiosity to supernatural powers. These "basics" have fallen out of focus due to a concern with "the Sacred" and the complexity of ritual and theological detail afforded us by the accessibility of data from many disciplines.

This project will be the substance of the prestigious Gates lecture at Grinnell and the Eliot lecture at Reed College which I will deliver in March and April of 2007. Thus the heart (gist?) of the book could be complete by the end of this academic year, with another six months to elaborate a full manuscript for dissemination to outside readers.

If, as I have been repeatedly told, my 1992 book on ritual had an important influence on the field, then this book on believing, while standing on its own, will also complete the argument begun in 1992 about thought and action in the theoretical analyses of religion. Although I plan to write at least one more book, on those Chinese morality texts, I see Believing as my culminating contribution to the field of Religious Studies. Believing will demonstrate that Religious Studies is a multi-disciplinary field focusing on religion because religion is out there, that is, religion is widely assumed to be the entity that exists so influentially in our world. The field is not based on being covert believers, or the need
to rescue religion from the sciences, or because of any 'special' relationship to the Sacred (e.g., Eliade, among others), or due to a misunderstanding of the historicity of a term. I hope this argument will both validate the field and redirect it, from semi-theological categories to reflective explorations of functional equivalents to what we mean by religion in all the cultural forms this will take.

As I have written elsewhere, any "critical" study must first explain why the object of the study is seen as something to be explained in the first place, as a problem. Then it must analyze the history of the problem has been defined. That is for starters.
Belief: A Classificatory Lacuna and Disciplinary "Problem"

Catherine Bell

In a curious omission, the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, both the first and the revised second editions, 1986 and 2005 respectively, leaves out the term "belief" as the subject of a distinct entry. (Eliade 1986; Jones 2005) This may have been relatively unintentional and simply due to organizational problems involved in lining up writers with topics. The largest topics are always the hardest to assign and have accepted. And the *Encyclopedia* is a justifiably award-winning achievement by an international crew of major scholars, which has had important if subtle ramifications for unification of the study of religion. One should not overemphasize the presence of an absence. Yet it is interesting and perhaps important to note to this one. The inquisitive reader who turns to "Belief" is instructed to "See Doubt (and Belief)," for what the 2005 edition explains is a philosophical discussion of the interrelation of doubt and belief in the Western tradition" -- although quite theologically focused for nearly half the essay, with the addition of two useful sentences on *dharma* in India. (Jones 2005: 2423-2427). Belief is indexed in several other places in the final volume. The term and even the "Doubt" discussion of it are not in the Synoptic Index provided by both editions, which usefully classify "Religious Phenomena" and "Specific Religions," like Christianity, with topics related to them. It is not listed as an example of "Phenomena of Religion," which does include cats, clowns and cocks, to cite some random entries from just one alphabetical section, nor is belief considered under "Methods of Study," "Philosophy and Religion," or "Scholarly Terms." The Index gives greater attention to "Faith," but it also fails to appear in most of the preceding synoptical sections. Faith is noted in
discussions of individual scholars like Peter Berger and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, as well as increasingly encompassing entries such as “Calvin,” “Experience,” and “in” Buddhism, Islam, and Judaism. On the whole, faith seems to be a term, if not a topic, which is more regularly invoked than belief in encyclopedia articles. One must conclude that belief was of sufficiently minor importance, from any angle, to religion as it was conceived by the scholars who organized and wrote for this definitive work in the field of history of religions and, one can conclude, religious studies in general.

The “Hastings” Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, which predates the Encyclopedia of Religion by some 80 years, includes an extensive and informative article on the topic, while The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion, edited by Jonathan Z. Smith and published about half-way between the first and second editions of Eliade’s encyclopedia, also addresses the topic in an entry of a comparatively good length. (Hastings 1908-26, reprint 1955; Smith 1995: 107-110) Critical Terms for the Study of Religion decided it was important, including a provocative chapter on the term by the Buddhologist, Donald S. Lopez. (Taylor 1998) Yet the Guide to the Study of Religion, which came out a few years after Critical Terms with a fuller list of topics, also chose to avoid this particular aspect of the popular imagination about religion. (Braun and McCutcheon, 2000).

One might also be confused as to the place of the term in anthropology. While any number of studies from E. B. Tylor through Emile Durkheim, E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham, Clifford Geertz, and Talal Asad have specifically addressed the nature of “belief” and its place in understanding religion, it can be well represented in a popular anthology on the anthropology of religion, but not indexed at all in a reputable general introduction to the subject. (See Lambek 2002; Morris 1987) Still, anthropology has a clear record of explicit discussion of
The descriptive adequacies of the term belief, while history of religions cannot point to any except for the thoughtful work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. As founder of the comparative religions program at Harvard Divinity School, he never saw himself, nor was he seen, as a member of the so-called phenomenological school of study that generated the encyclopedia. (W. C. Smith 1977, 1979) Yet critiques of the theological tendencies in all these non-theological attempts at the study of religion rarely made such fine distinctions and Smith might have been a logical choice to contribute to the encyclopedia on the topic of belief. (Wiebe 1979)

The reasons behind decisions to include or exclude a topic in any particular taxonomy of religion, as opposed to the empirical sciences, may be nearly impossible to discern reliably. Jonathan Z. Smith’s attention to issues of classification and taxonomy with regard to religion as well as botany and the logic of classification in general is not merely a signal contribution to the self-awareness of the field, it is nearly legendary in his personal biography. His interest in the ordering of categories is the material of autobiographical reminisces of precocious predilections rooted in the earliest of childhood pursuits. (J.Z. Smith 2004:19-25) It is not surprising, therefore, that he has articulated a clear rubric to distinguish the intent of a dictionary, handbook, and encyclopedia. While his account of each would make the topic of belief especially important to a dictionary, and perhaps less demanding of a handbook, it only makes the absence of belief from an encyclopedia more intriguing. For Smith, “an encyclopedia is essentially topical,” which means delineating something of all the resources and information needed to “explore a topic as a whole.” He cites Alexander Manuila’s “useful” description of an encyclopedia as “a comprehensive compilation of information on concepts pertaining to some or all fields of knowledge.” (2004: 164)
The absence of belief from Mircea Eliade’s encyclopedic project must be a result, direct or indirect, of an editorial perspective imposed on the enormously amorphous subject of religion. In his preface to the first edition, Eliade naturally laid out the goals of the encyclopedia, “conceived as a system of articles on important ideas, beliefs, rituals, myths, symbols, and persons that have played a role in the universal history of religions from Paleolithic times to the present day.” (Eliade 1986, vol. 1, xi) His explicit schema for the encyclopedia involved both historical descriptions and articles expressing contemporary interest in the structure and morphology of the "universal sacred." Eliade emphasized myths, symbols and, he notes, due to the spur provided by the modern desacralization of Western societies, the value of greater knowledge of primal religions. In the “Forward” added after his death, meant to supplement the Preface which had been merely drafted by Eliade, Joseph M. Kitagawa very systematically laid out further guiding principles of the encyclopedia project, explicitly comparing its focus to the earlier Hastings encyclopedia. In the various formulations given by these two editors, belief is barely mentioned. Rather the language used most often cites religious ideas, practices, and phenomena known to the human race, or the ideas, practices, and persons in the religious experience of humankind. In yet another formulation, Kitagawa invokes Joachim Wach’s three expressions of religion, the theoretical (doctrines, myths, and theologies), the practical (cults, sacraments, or meditations), and the sociological (religious groups and ecclesiastical structures). (Eliade 1986, 1: xiii) Only when specifying the “raw” data of religion, does Kitagawa, like Eliade, mention beliefs alongside “practices, feelings, moods, attitudes.” (1:xiv) Clearly this encyclopedia was meant to highlight the interpretive categories of the study of religion rather than systematically cataloging the “raw data” itself. If so, it might be seen less as an encyclopedia of religion than an encyclopedia of the study of religion, admittedly a fine splitting
of hairs, but in keeping with the analyses the project has invited. (Smart 1988)² Of course, J. Z. Smith's rubric defines an encyclopedia explicitly in terms of providing the resources that would serve as tools for the study of a subject.

One aspect of the problem presented by this particular lacuna lies in the fact that the history of religions does not indulge in an overly esoteric set of interpretive terms as research tools. There are those introduced by Eliade, such as the sacred (arguably different from Durkheim’s), the sacred center, and the cosmogonic myth. The neophyte, moreover, will surely work hard to pin down the meanings of hierophany, morphology and hermeneutics. Eliade’s volume, Patterns in Comparative Religion, identifies sky gods, solar cults, vegetation symbols such as the tree of knowledge, ritual orgies, and myths of renewal -- altogether a more compact and unoriginal litany than that first developed proposed by his 18th and 19th century predecessors. (Eliade 1963) It is not difficult to understand that belief might not be deemed an acceptable "interpretive" category, yet its position as “datum” is exactly what concerned anthropologists like E. E. Evans-Pritchard, Rodney Needham, Martin Southwald, Richard Shweder, and Malcolm Ruel, who provide the fullest discussions. Overall, it is unsettling that history of religions as a field has failed to have any discussions of the term. Although it is ignored in all formal senses, the field makes nearly constant reference to the idea of belief in nearly every publication.

Aside from its questionable place in the history of religions, belief appears to be identified and defined in very different ways by such disciplines such as philosophy, anthropology, and cognitive theory. Perhaps for reasons endemic to all of their discussions, it has become something of a habit to refer to it as “the problem of belief.” More than a few scholars go so far as to identify belief as the problem of their respective fields. (E.g., Shweder 1989; Viswanathan 1998: xvii) It certainly is a problem to attempt to define or analyze something as
widely referred to as belief. Even the scope of such terms as “love,” “hope,” and “hate” would not present as great a challenge since they rarely slip so easily from the position of datum to analytic category. In general, few terms have spread themselves so freely across the lexicon of European languages as belief, through its Latin derivations from credo or fides, its Greek form, pistis, or even the Hebrew hešemin (root 'mn). (Ruel 2002:101) Its uses are legion -- and bewildering. One can use the term in reference to a god of biblical qualities or one’s confidence in a particular television weathercaster. That old master of the English language, W. C. Fields, may have caught the crux of the dilemma with a characteristic pronouncement: “Everyone should believe in something. I believe I’ll have another drink.”

As for scholarly analysis of its use, the most significant literature easily stretches from David Hume (some argue for Fontenelle) to Donald Davidson, and from W. C. Smith to Slavoj Žižek. (Hume 1992 [1777]; Davidson 1984; W. C. Smith 1977; Žižek 2001) Useful studies include the work of Paul Veyne on the historical imagination, Paul Connerton and Danielle Hervieu-Léger on cultural memory, Pierre Bourdieu on practical logic, and Michel de Certeau on psycho-social interpretations (Veyne 1988; Connerton 1989; Hervieu-Léger 2000; Bourdieu 1980; de Certeau 1984, 1985) Among the anthropologists noted above, Needham, Southwald, and Ruel have been the most explicit and contentious in a long interpretive, and re-interpretive, discussion launched by Durkheim. He classified all religious phenomena into “two basic categories: beliefs and rites,” defining religious beliefs as the essential element of religion, the “representations that express the nature of sacred things” (Durkheim 1969 [1912]: 51, 62). The theological tradition is even more extensive, of course, stretching from Tertullian to Tillich, Irenaeus to Rahner, with pertinent commentaries along the way by Alisdair MacIntyre, W. C. Smith, and Peter Berger, to name a few. (MacIntyre 1957; Berger 1967) Many have insisted that
Christian categories of belief are so endemic to Euro-American culture that they inevitably insinuate themselves into any study of religion, making the “beliefs” of other traditions a common but misleading expression. More than 20 years ago, Needham and Southwald took up contrasting positions on the ethnographic situation, while Paul Veyne went off in another direction completely to discuss the complexities of any history of beliefs among the ancient Greeks. (Needham 1972; Southwald 1979, 1983; Veyne 1988) Shweder identified the issue of belief as the “fault-line” in the field of anthropology, while in an extended argument against the usefulness of the term, Ruel cited W. C. Smith on the Christian presumptions in the term. (Ruel 2002) These conversations continue, most recently with Donald S. Lopez casting belief as yet another example of Christian colonialism in the guise of ultimately obfuscating scholarship. (Lopez 1998) At the same time, however, belief is the recipient of unqualified attention in new work being done in cognitive psychology and bio-evolutionary theory. (Boyer 2000; Barrett 2004; Atran 2002) All of these sources of input allow one to conclude that belief is clearly an issue in human reasoning and communication, cognition and memory, psychological orientation and social conditioning, theological reflection, as well as modern analyses of secularism and even human evolution. If so central to the work of other fields, the is not unlikely that history of religions’ lack of theoretical interest lies precisely in our routine reliance on its nebulous status as some sort of raw data or biased theoretical tool.

It is interesting to note that in contrast to the complexity of its presence and absence in academic discourse, belief is all over the popular press, which relentlessly simplifies it into oppositions such as belief and reason. The popular press is particularly ready to expose the problems posed by belief and believers. Several years ago I noted such studies on the silliness of religious beliefs as Wendy Kaminer’s *Sleeping with Terrestrials: the Rise of Irrationalism and*
the Perils of Piety and Michael Shermer’s Why People Believe Weird Things. (Kaminer 1999; Shermer 1997; Bell 2002) Since then, reactions to the terrorism of 9/11 in America have come into print, soon joined by equally intense reactions to the decision by the state of Kansas school board to introduce “intelligent design” along side evolution in the state’s science curriculum. (See Talbot 2005) Although this decision was successfully challenged in court, and half of the school board was subsequently voted out of office, the specter of religion creeping into science classes continues to provide grist for the mills of scholarly indignation. Among popular works, Sam Harris has published two that attempt to preach rationalism to the unconverted religious, The End of Faith and Letter to a Christian Nation; but their influence is dwarfed by the similar efforts of the specialists, Breaking the Spell by the philosopher of science Daniel Dennett and the God Delusion by the well-known Oxford scientist, Richard Dawkins. (Harris 2004, 2006; Dennett 2006; Dawkins 2006) All extol the value of rationality in a world dangerously misled by religious irrationalism.

These opinions constitute the latest chapter in Western culture’s perpetual polarization of belief and reason, faith and rationality, religion and science. The Enlightenment articulated the issues most clearly, of course, in a variety of formal documents and social reorganizations, articulating the poles of this dialectic. Yet we are still seeing our culture in terms of faith versus reason even though we often seem to live in a very post-Enlightenment world. The Enlightenment paradigm now encodes a wide variety of American ideological if not material interests, specifically involving biblical religion versus Darwinian science. Scientists, theologians, and hack writers all contribute to a fray that politicians have been very willing to exploit. All start from the same stark duality in which science is the natural opposite of religion. Each pole alert to restrain the power wielded by the other. Only a savvy journalist or two has
suggested in passing the degree to which this simplistic view of religion and science is a play of shadow puppets manipulated by interest groups on a political playing field. In the end, the paradigm of reason versus belief remains deeply ingrained in the discourse of modern culture even though it may not be a very good depiction of the actual conditions of modern culture.

In the academic discipline of philosophy, quite beyond the machinations of the popular press, the qualities of belief are not opposed to reason and simplified Enlightenment dichotomies have been left behind, although not forgotten. The views of thinkers from Hume to Wittgenstein are often surveyed at this point to illustrate a lively philosophical tradition, continued by such late 20th century figures as Stuart Hampshire, Gilbert Harman, and Richard Rorty, with Rorty evoking the lineage of American pragmatism from William James through John Dewey. In an earlier publication I focused at some length on the American philosopher Donald Davidson in order to understand better the “problem of belief” as it figures in current philosophical analyses. (Bell 2002) In striking contrast to the popular perspective, his philosophy generally thinks of belief as a universal quality, playing an integral role in a basic holism (not a division) interlacing thought and action in general. Davidson argues that a level of broad agreement is the condition for any linguistic understanding of each other. (Note Godlove, 2002: 10) Asserting that “belief is central to all kinds of thought,” he explains that belief is what allows us to take for granted general perceptions of the material world that are basic to the formation of thoughts, spoken statements, and the conditions needed to understand each other. Belief and meaningfulness are dependent on each other and have a formal role in the act of interpretation. More specifically, Davidson argues that we have to believe that the statements someone makes are or can be true, even if we conclude he or she is lying, mistaken, or crazy. Thus we must infer belief to grant the meaning needed to make the most basic act of interpreting each other. (Davidson 1984:156).
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This is enough to illustrate the contrast philosophy presents to the popular view opposing belief with the meaningfulness of reason; instead of making belief the weak of half of this type of dualism, a philosopher like Davidson locates the problem of belief in the universal act of person-to-person interpretation.

In the closely intertwined disciplines of anthropology, sociology, psychology and cognitive theory, the problem of belief also concerns the degree of holism that is understood as basic to social understanding. Yet these fields would not use Davidson’s terminology, so comparing their views of belief is a more delicate project. It is fair to conclude, however, that for most scholars of culture, belief involves the problem of universalism versus particularism, that is, on the one hand, what can we assume to be common to all people simply by virtue of our shared evolution, history, or simply the human condition; on the other hand, what should be considered culturally particular to a social practice even if subject to forces of diffusion that can push practices beyond an original point of germination. Universality may mean common to all social life or simply mentally accessible to all. In the latter case, because one is familiar with belief in the God of the Abrahamic religions, one may feel, rightly or wrongly, that one has some mental access to how ancient Greeks believed in their pantheon of gods.

Particularism suggests that we have no such access to the experiences of another religion and, indeed, can only make sense of what is so foreign by attempting to reconstruct, more or less accurately, a system of ideas in which specific pieces can be illuminated. By the time any universal or particularist project is underway, it is probably rife with assumptions and precarious leaps of logic. Yet, at the same time, it is easy to see a measure of common sense to both positions – that we can understand something about other human experiences and we should not assume that we can understand anything about them.
As I have noted elsewhere, Shweder conducted an exemplary project to attempt a reasonable synthesis to the opposition of universalism and particularism. He clarified all the different versions of the arguments for both sides and then developed a resolution, self-consciously postmodernist in its idealism, in which he argued that opposites need not be opposed! Shweder maintained that the discipline of anthropology was itself the product of a collision between our notions of universality and particularity, which, like continental plates, created a "fault-line" easily illustrated by any number of vexing scenarios that routinely come up for the anthropologist. Indeed, he suggested, should anyone truly resolve such scenarios, anthropology as we know it would probably not be needed any more; the whole field would collapse. A typical "vexing" scenario is what he calls the "witch question" -- which in fact is not that removed from the possible experiences of a normal citizen in a multi-cultural society. Accord to Shweder, the witch scenario unfolds when your informant, the person on whose judgment you have so greatly relied, takes you aside to admit to being a witch, a confidence that might possibly involve some personal danger to the one making it. You come from a tradition that does not believe in witches, so how do you accept the statement by your informant -- as true or not true? Do you believe it or not? (Shweder 1989: 109-110; Bell 2002: 106-07).

With the argument that the interpretation of beliefs is the central anthropological question and the distinctive fault-line of the discipline, Shweder's answer is two-fold: unquestionably, the person is a witch (in this way he recognizes the culturally relative and particular), but as the anthropologist who must reconstruct the system of ideas that "makes sense" of this belief, he claims a type of "transcendence" of the particular and the relative (thereby recognizing the universal in some form). Shweder hastens to add that this sense of transcendence must not be accompanied by any sense of superiority, since one culture is simply using its categories to
interpret another, an operation no doubt being performed by the informant as well. Instead, he wants to establish a position of relative “transcendence without superiority” with regard to the “realities” that another culture presents to one’s own categories. (Shweder 1989: 133) I think that Shweder has, in fact, described one of the ways we negotiate the fault-line, not how we might resolve it. Anthropology may be safe for another day. While less developed than Shweder’s, Talal Asad also attempts an anthropology of non-universal, fully particular assumptions and categories, as does Jonathan Z. Smith in several analyses, most notably “Religion, Religions, Religious,” and “Manna, Mana Everywhere and /u/ /u/ /u/” (Asad 1993; J. Z. Smith 1998, 2002)

In contrast to the parsing of the problem of belief in anthropology, the term presents few concerns for cognitive theory, a field that is currently the locus of much excited debate by scholars of all types. Composed of psychologists, neurologists, evolutionary biologists and all the subfields in between, cognitive theory gives a great deal of attention to why and how people believe. One recent title makes this explicit: “Why Would Anyone Believe in God?” (Barrett 2004) The most general “short” answer identifies believing as a cognitive process selected for its adaptive value in the evolutionary task of human beings surviving in stable groups. This makes believing part of what created thinking, sociable humans, although some cognitive theorists are quick to point out that it is a vestige of evolution that ill equips us for modern life. Despite its focus on the etiology of belief, cognitive theory simply defines it as positing the existence of what “counter-intuitive agencies.” (Boyer 2001) So, while philosophers regard religious believing as just one instance of the larger cognitive phenomenon of belief, the former is the main focus of cognitive theory. Most cognitivists are unabashedly “scientific,” intent on explaining why the irrational beliefs of religion came into existence and remain long past their more obvious adaptive uses.
For those in the fields of neurology, the neurophysiology of cognition, or evolutionary biology, interest in religion is tied to new research tools like magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) as well as the sheer synergy of these fields coming together around new maps of the brain and paradigms of consciousness and neural processing. Their apparent lack of hermeneutical interest in the challenges posed by language is in keeping with the style of science generally, but can make their work very alien to humanists. When they locate “the problem of belief,” they solve it, that is, they explain what is going on. Even when their explanations can only be speculative at best, the cognitive theorist sounds very reductionist to scholars concerned to interpret (verstehen) rather than explain (eklaren). Some of these theorists are not blind to the dilemmas of social science or even the humanities, but they are unusual “cross-over” figures. (See Atran 2002; Pyysiäinen 2004; and Turner 2002).

The late anthropologist, Roy Rappaport, used cognitive theory, among other methods, to develop a speculative but insightful account of the nature of belief. He assumed its biological evolution and focused on the dynamics of its social enactment, through which an experience and concept of “the sacred” was generated among human beings, functioning in turn to mold them as human beings. This social process involved -- as Vico, Comte, and Hume all suggested -- an experience of power and an act of submission to the idea of a higher authority. Rappaport playfully described the concept of power in this way: “The unfalsifiable supported by the undeniable yields the unquestionable, which transforms the dubious, the arbitrary, and the conventional into the correct, the necessary, and the natural.” (Rappaport 1999: 405) The process of deferring the quality of unquestionableness to the unknown comes to constitute sanctity itself. As a form of absolute authority, the sacred makes possible “the foundation upon which the human way of life stands.” For Rappaport, belief in sanctity enables humanity to evolve social
community, intellectual reflexivity, and the experience of transcendence itself. (Rappaport 1999: 293-97, 395-405)

The idea that religion may be a selected adaptive feature in human evolution is far from new; in some form it goes back to the oldest pre-Darwinian notions of social evolution evinced in 18th century writers. Even mid-twentieth century phenomenological theorists of religion, like Eliade, who regarded religion as *sui generis* or non-reducible to other forces, could speculate about the evolutionary origins of religion before confining discussion to the “phenomenon” at hand, the origins of which should not matter. Yet the phenomenology of religion approach, now known as history of religions, has been significantly lax in comparison to its disciplinary neighbors in pursuing belief beyond old questions of its origin. Perhaps the more need in the last decades to distinguish itself from theology on the one hand and anthropology on the other might explain this odd lacuna in centuries of analysis. Perhaps the absence of belief as a discrete entry in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* contributes to the very definition of the borders of the phenomenological study of religion. Nonetheless, with an exception here and there, colleagues in the history of religions, when compared to philosophers, anthropologists and even cognitive theorists, have not seen any “problem” with belief. In fact, we may need to be prodded to see belief at all.

In 1972 Rodney Needham noted the expedient ease with which many ethnographers blithely claimed that such and such people believe in this or that god and gods, comfortable with the assumption that the English verb “to believe” captures the particular religious sensibilities of a very different people. Of course, as the Shweder discussion made clear, a universal assumption about the know-ability of other peoples and cultures has been basic to anthropology. Yet in contrast to those who found belief everywhere, Needham pointed out the close attention to local
terms first used by Evans-Pritchard in his study of the Nuer and their theology. Needham himself examined the indigenous terms for anything comparable to belief among the Navaho, Hinduism, the dialects of the Philippines, and the Penan of Borneo, an exercise that evinced “the bewildering variety of senses attaching to words … indifferently translated by the English ‘believe’.” (Needham 1972: 32-37)

Most recently, the Buddhologist Donald Lopez analyzed the term belief for its usefulness in the study of religion, challenging the basic assumption of universality. For Lopez, our notion of belief as something common to all religions is part of our blindness to difference and our willingness to convert the world to one way of thinking. He argues that what we intend by belief has a clear historical locus in the matrix of meanings forged by early Christianity and developed in the course of Christian history as it sought to define its theological orthodoxy and institutional jurisdiction. (Lopez 1998) In fact, it was during the Inquisition, in-fact, that belief acquired its current distinctive gloss by which outward action is deemed an inadequate indication of the views one harbors deep within the heart. Only torture would reveal those sentiments.

Lopez illustrates his point with the dramatic narrative of Peter of Verona, a 13th century preacher asked by Pope Gregory IX to launch an Inquisition against the Gnostic heresy of the Cathars or Albigensians. This early Inquisition actually institutionalized testing a person for his or her true beliefs. But Lopez also notes that how deeply the Inquisition was involved in both the confiscation of property, which certainly added to the local zeal of the movement, and in the struggle between the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor for political control of a great deal of southern France. Peter of Verona, early Inquisitor, eventually became a martyr to the cause: the story has it that as he was dying from a stab wound, he inscribed “credo,” the beginning of the orthodox creed of beliefs, on the ground in his own blood. The credo, of course, points back to
the long historical importance of oral and public assertion of creeds that arose in the context of disputing heresies. However, summing up a great deal of history in this one brief historical sketch of Peter the Inquisitor and martyr, Lopez concludes that Christianity came to distinguish belief not by what a person said publicly, but by “the invisible content of the mind.” (Lopez 1998: 26-27) Since the means for identifying believers from non-believers would give great power to the one deciding who had what in their hearts, Lopez also concludes that the idea of belief “is neither natural nor universal. It might be described as an ideology, an idea that arises from a specific set of material interests.” (Lopez 1998: 28)

Using a second example, Lopez describes the 1881 Buddhist Catechism with which Colonel Henry Steele Olcott sought to bring Singhalese Buddhism into the modern world. In Olcott’s understanding, Buddhism was a religion and, therefore, a system of beliefs. So he was shocked by how poorly the pious monks of Sri Lanka could recite back to him the basic beliefs that early translations had made so familiar to Olcott. He was especially concerned that ill-prepared Buddhists would not be able to hold off the growing influence of Christian missionaries who were destroying the indigenous culture. Pointing to Olcott’s “ideology of belief,” Lopez suggests that his assumptions about the universal nature of religion were rooted in Christian history and doomed, inadvertently, to obfuscate a true understanding of Buddhism. (Lopez 1998: 29-33)

Lopez’s argument for the cultural particularism of belief is welcome for taking up the topic of belief at all, even if his conclusions banish the term for reasons provided by a postcolonial perspective. Yet it is not obvious that his analysis actually manages to remove Christian assumptions, and agency, from the center of the historical record, rather than further crediting Christianity with a religious perspective it may simply have inherited, borrowed, or
patched together. Nor does the subsequent history of Christianity in formerly colonized cultures deserve less study or respect for reasons of an historically explicit act of obfuscation. Unfortunately, it is also not clear that Lopez’s provocative and exhilarating analysis will have much of an impact on the history of religions’ passivity toward the longstanding controversies surrounding belief, only a few of which Lopez is able to engage. After all, a fundamental assumption about the unity and transparency of believing as a phenomenon has supported the whole enterprise of comparative religions and most “world religions” textbooks. Obfuscating ideology with material interests may be too much of a challenge. Still, Lopez’s argument about a “critical term” puts the right questions to the historical record and effectively challenges the history of religions as to the degree of universality we can continue to comfortably assume as well as the degree of particularity with which we may want to rewrite our master narratives. How the field deals with such a challenge could well predict its ability to survive in the twenty-first century.
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Southwald, Martin. 1979. “Religious Belief.” Man (N.S.), 14: 628-44


FOOTNOTES

1 The author would like to thank Lindsay Jones for his generous assistance with part of this project, although the final argument reflects only the opinions of the author.

2 Religious Studies 24, no. 11 (March 1988) featured seven review articles, while the Journal of Religion 70, no.3 (1990) was a special issue dedicated to review articles on the Encyclopedia. Also see Smart 1988.
From note (17) In a more recent and distinctly new current within the field, the anthropologist Matthew Engelke reminds us that the path breaking anthropologists of the twentieth century, E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner, who both spent years in the field participating in the elaborate ritual life of the Nuer and the Ndembu, respectively, each converted to Catholicism after a few restless years back in the halls of academe. Perhaps after years of close involvement in the highly structured ritual lives of these communities, and then the relative sterility of the rationalized modern technocratic state, Catholicism presented the closest answer to a ritual life with a similarly embracing complexity. (Matthew Engelke, The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on ‘the inner life’” Anthropology Today 18, no. 6 [December 2002]: 3-8) Engelke also wonders if the attempt to understand one religion can leave one in a better position to understand another; in this case, Evans-Pritchard’s and Turner’s understanding of the African religions they documented so well might have given them insight and empathy for a religion closer to home. Engelke seems to be innocently raising anew an issue that, in a version only slightly different, marked the birth pains of the degree-granting discipline of the non-theological study of religion, namely, does one have to be a member of a religion to truly understand it. As just stated, the question implies that outsiders engaged in the formal, secular study of religion could not really understand Catholicism or Nuer or any other religion. Today it is easily granted that such a scholar would understand the religion differently, indeed, be engaged in answering very different questions than those of concern to practicing members of the religious community. Through the 1960s, however, this issue involved a lengthy and occasionally contentious process of differentiation as the study of religion carved out a place for itself alongside the other disciplines devoted to religion – theology, scripture, and ministerial studies, among others. (See J Z Smith article [in his folder] and in Relating Religion?)

from text (19) Ewing describes how the circumstances of her dreams left her wobbling in her confidence as an objective ethnographer. To an extent not clear to herself, she became a type a believer and, therefore, an insider--someone who understood and was told more.¹ Yet going native can leave one unable to explain any of this insider information to one’s professional community by virtue of vows of confidence, or simply the inability to convey the convincing insider experience.

Paradigms Behind (and Before) the Modern Concept of Religion

Abstract

This essay identifies five paradigms, undoubtedly among many more, which are basic to understanding the historical emergence and uses of the generic idea of “religion” in the Christian cultures of Europe and America. The spread of this concept has been sufficiently thorough in recent centuries as to make religion appear to be a “social fact,” to use Durkheim’s phrase, rather than so many cultural expressions and different social practices. The supremacy of Euro-American culture—and an academy still saturated with Christian ideas—has enjoined other cultures and forms of religiosity to conform to this idea of religion: for these cultures contentment with the status quo can vie with the anxieties of influence, including "modernization." The key paradigms discussed are the following: Christianity as the prototype; religion as the opposite of reason; the modern formulation of “world religions”; the cultural necessity of religion; and then critical analysis of the Western "construction" of religion. These paradigms demonstrate the limits on theoretical variety in the field, the difficulty in making real changes in set ways of thinking, and productive foci for interdisciplinary methods of study.
Introduction: Paradigms and Religious Studies

Some projections of current global political and economic forces suggest that religion could eclipse nationalism and ethnicity as the source of future friction and fighting. Samuel Huntington's much critiqued fear of a coming “clash” of religious civilizations may or may not prove correct in the end, but there is no question that here and now many local clashes as well as pervasive global tensions are routinely iterated in terms of the different goals of religious cultural traditions—from the political speeches of George W. Bush to those of Omar Bin Laden. Yet are the multiple social and cultural differences involved in these current clashes adequately, or usefully, described as religious? Even before Huntington, of course, scholars with historical or anthropological backgrounds invoked the notion of “religious cultures” in order to express both the power of religious socialization over time and space, as well as the vague inadequacy of the idea of religion itself in capturing the full scope of the social traditions and mores involved. But historians should be wary of any fresh reification of religious identities. The clearest example of the many tissue layers that build up into some popular nominalization of a religious tradition can be found, I believe, in even a cursory exploration of the paradigms that have constructed the notion of religion itself. Such an examination makes clear the obvious, that “religion” is an historical term like all other terms and phenomena. That is, it emerged at some point in time with a set of uses and was pressed into much wider application when it became useful in naming something that previously did not exist or did not need a name.

The analysis that follows is an initial and therefore somewhat idiosyncratic exercise to try to isolate both some key layers among the paradigms that have shaped our notion of religion, as well as the variety of explorations emanating from these paradigms that are shaping the field of religious studies. However, it must be said that I am not an historian and can show little respect
for disciplinary boundaries. In addition, I draw on far too much material to do so well in all cases.

My goal, however, is some sense of the construction of an evolving term that remains very
critical today, although with what one suspects must be constant changes of emphasis in the
facets that unfold. My working premise that this historical process is not necessarily a logical or
internally directed one may allow for a light touch in repeatedly shuffling through the cards of
history, trying to catch a glimpse of a partial story line or simply consistency of discontinuities.

In brief, my storyline is to explore a handful of key paradigms that have been and still are
basic to academic understandings of religion in a number of fields. I use the term "paradigm"
here in its most neutral sense, as a basic tool for advancing knowledge as a social enterprise.
Moreover, while using the general ethos and particular aspects that Thomas Kuhn's gave the
term, I am not attempting to invoke any of his specific arguments (at this time) or to open any
interpretive fuss about his meanings. Conventionally, we understand paradigms to be those
overly convenient and under-theorized terms that create the theoretical scaffolding for all sorts of
other ideas. Eventually, however, people can notice some of the assistance provided by the
paradigm and even suspect it of having an ideological function. From this perspective, to call
something a paradigm is already to recognize it as a type of "black box" or "knot" of ideas
operative in our discourse and raises questions about why a paradigm may be so useful to a
particular subject. I hope the irony of the situation is clear: paradigms are the building blocks for
systems of knowledge until we are actually perceive the degree to which we assume their support.
At that point we fear that the linked imagery of the paradigm may constrain thought as much as
facilitate it. Its efficacy suddenly too apparent, we are bound to inquire why we found this way
of seeing things so constructive and whether we should rethink the model and possibly retire it—if we can.
To explore paradigms such as those constitutive of the idea religion is like unpacking a set of Chinese boxes or Russian dolls, always another within the last one. It might also be compared to uncovering archeological strata that provide a picture of geological ages containing, perhaps, some of the detritus of human history, like the carbonation of ancient campfires or a fossilized set of footprints on an ancient lakeshore. It makes sense to imagine these paradigms as historical stages only if it is clearly understood that few facets are ever left behind. Even if the outermost cultural carapace of historical style is discarded, the associated ideas, both structured and structuring, can remain to hold most of a worldview in place. One easy example is seen in the field of Religious Studies today: it is a tent so large that there are all sorts of sub-communities distinctly rooted in marginal paradigms of religions still able to thrive in the darker corners, often with their own journals, websites, and membership lists. While we may challenge the integrity of the edifice, even work to knock down some big sections of it, there are basements and rafters of suppositions with annexes of linked structures, all of which hold a great deal of the original paradigm together no matter how fully we attack it. Paradigms are anything if not redundant. Yet I cannot think of any more serious focus of intellectual exploration in the field.

Optimistically, tracing some of these boxes within boxes may suggest other major constructions and interpretations attending the way we study religion or simply how we talk about it. Most of the first part of this paper would be relatively uncontested by my colleagues, and some of my points are shortcuts through larger studies underway. Yet I will also try to suggest a style of inquiry consistent with the challenge of these paradigms, a challenge that may redress the current sense of limited choices and directions in the study of religion. Certainly, I can provide examples of the difficulties of trying to undo a paradigm. The smaller models I have explored at length include traditional views of the uniqueness of ritual action, the cosmological
medium of the text and, currently, our cultural beliefs about beliefs. On the surface the latter may seem like a robust, free-for-all economy of ideas, but tensions and increasing rigidity are the result, with little relation to traditional sources of authority or discernment. Hints of another paradigm lie in an attitude deeply ingrained within scholars in religious studies—or else we would be historians—namely, the assumption that religion is fundamentally good, embodying the noblest of human ideals and distilled wisdom, if not sacred history and commands, despite the obvious human lapses everywhere. Theoretically speaking, the field of religious studies has not really moved much beyond such starting assumptions. Even if we have trendier reference points, deeply ingrained paradigms are still used to explain us to ourselves, enabling us to invoke a common pool of ideas about religion with few attempts to pull aside the curtain.

**Boxes within Boxes**

*Christianity as the Prototype*

It is necessary to choose a beginning, a first box, even though the choice may be ultimately arbitrary. So I will start with the enduring paradigm created with the solidification of Christianity as the prototype for religion in general. The ascendancy of Christianity in Europe—gradually spread by missionaries, travelers, and a variety of military and cultural colonizers—made it seem natural that Christianity be taken up in the European cultural milieu as the frame of reference for what religion is. As the prototype for religion, Christianity provided all the assumptions with which people began to address historically and geographically different religious cultures. In other words, as the prototype for the general category of “religion,” an idea that needed to emerge itself, Christianity was the major tool used to encompass, understand, and dominate the multiplicity. Yet there is more to this prototype than any quick nod of
understanding. The long and varied history of Christianity that naturally continues into our time has been subject to processes of dissemination and appropriation (or “inculturation,” to use church language) that created in turn a great many Christianities throughout the world from the very beginning. Many have long been lost to history, others seriously understudied, an example of how scholarship can aid the often cruel processes by which the history of Christianity has appeared so much “neater” for 2000 years than it actually was—or is.

Nonetheless, even as practiced by reservation Sioux, Russian Orthodox, or the Independent Churches of South Africa, the fact that so many peoples regard themselves as Christian means that, aside from its political and numerical dominance, the Christian prototype for “religion in general” to believers, non-believers, and scholars is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy, and not likely to change soon despite the tensions accruing in academic circles. Chinese and Japanese of the 16th through the 19th centuries would frequently reply to close questioning that they did not have any religion because what they did have seemed totally unlike the model presented by Christian missionaries. Today these citizens might say they are Buddhist or Confucian, atheistic or involved in one the many “new” religions that have developed in Asia in the last 50-100 years. I had the opportunity to discuss the Christian prototype problem with a bright young religion scholar bearing a very current example of a globalized personal background—native Taiwanese, PhD from UCLA, seeking work in the USA, and an ordained minister in a fast-growing Buddhist Theravada sect known as Yi Fo Sheng. But he showed surprising little understanding or interest. Of course, he had no alternative terms or models he could use within the standard scholarly language that determines admittance into the academic community, a version of English he had to work harder than most to mast. However, further conversation revealed the clue—that he had probably absorbed the whole Christian paradigm
through the sect’s 19th century scholar-founder who explicitly strove to “modernize” Buddhism in so many ways that it became a distinct sect, better conforming to Western expectations. 

The globalization of Christianity is beginning to get sustained scholarly attention. 

An African was not elected pope in Rome this past spring, but the possibility was talked about. More substantively, the Church of England is dealing with a growing number of African and Asian Anglican churches joining the list of those threatening to withdraw from the international communion over the ordination of an openly gay American minister (the Nigeria communion has recently announced its withdrawal). As more Christianities are explored, the prototype may well be challenged in at least two general ways, by us, secular scholars from outside the normal definitions of the fold, but also by ministers from within, who are making decisions about what Christianity will be in the future—or more specifically, what Anglicanism, Methodism, Roman Catholicism, and new independent forms indebted to only their only selective appropriation will be.

In describing the historical rise of Christianity as prototype, one might rightly ask about Judaism and Islam, both notably active in European history during the later centuries establishing Christian dominance. Yet even these early challenges to the development of the Christian prototype were effectively muted as each was given an early and consistent niche in the dominant Christian cosmology: Judaism was quickly demoted to those “refuse-niks” who rejected the truth, misguided brothers due to the share textual base and common roots (which not save failed to save them from the persecution of pogroms, but was served as an historical warrant for them); while Islam, the barbarians at the gate, were the threat that defined the very physical and psychological borders of Christendom. The differences among these three were, in fact, a type of proof to Christians of the distinctive Christ story: the eventual appreciation of the
monotheistic and textual inheritances in which all three participated were taken as further proof that the Christian model could contain and explain religion more widely. That all three participated in rather different monotheistic and textual inheritances took Christians until the twentieth century to work out.

*Religion as the Irrational*

The Enlightenment is responsible for many congruent cultural shifts, but for my narrow purposes, I will simply describe how it amended the previous idea of the Christian prototype with the emergence of a fully developed concept and terminology for a more generic notion of “religion” in itself, namely, religion as the irrational. Up until the 16th century, as Sam Preus nicely demonstrates, there was only the haziest notion of a general category of religion. 9 And the only judgments as to rationality or irrationality, influenced by the discovery of “The Philosopher,” concerned Christianity in particular: Thomas Aquinas argues that certain Christian mysteries, though not all, could not be determined by the use of reason and thus were the result of revelation. 10 The work of a close contemporary, the putative author of *The Travels of Marco Polo* (1275-92), was bestseller was written and popularized during the ascendancy of Christianity in Europe, well before the stirrings of the Enlightenment. For Marco, there were only four categories by which to classify and understand all the peoples he met, most of whom existed outside the structure of clear-cut nation states: a person was a Christian, Jew, Moor (Saracen), or a pagan. 11 Polo’s travel memoirs constantly refer to the stereotypes associated with each, and seldom was he surprised by any non-stereotypical behavior, except for those pagans, the Chinese, who astonished him with their good manners, deep learning, and clearly observed social order. 12 In fact, Marco is kindest toward all pagans, noting many humanitarian aspects of
their teaching and lives; he is brief on the Jews and unremittingly harsh on the Muslims—due in part, suggests Robert Latham, who introduces the Penguin Classic, to the trade rivalry they presented to the bold new hopes of Europeans.  

The Enlightenment’s separation of church and state, on top of Europe’s growing knowledge about and interaction with other religious cultures (e.g., Jesuits writing home with their version of a rationalized Confucianism) aided the standardization of a common term in popular parlance. Even though Christianity structured understanding of the notion of religion after itself, the term recognized, with excitement, that there were totally non-Christian religions out there. Of course, these foreign encounters led to debates in which the positive properties ascribed to the newly discovered religions, such as rational superiority or greater age in history, constantly alternated with evidence of their depravity. The Jesuits are particularly interesting to read for their unrelenting interpretive efforts to find in Confucianism what they felt just had to be there, some ancient evidence of the disclosure of the existence of God the Father and later the Son. Those who seized on such foreign examples to demonstrate the possibility of a rational religion (morality without metaphysics!), most famously Leibniz and Voltaire, were critiquing the Christian churches and working toward the separation of church and state. They and their predecessors were also attempting to maintain a natural option between the scientific realism that was the context of their interest and traditional religious devotion (and powerful churches) that formed an object of criticism; some sort of “religion” was widely regarded as the necessary source of morality, needed to hold the rabble to the norms of social order. The emergence of Deism, a rationalized Christianity so important for the founders of the independent American colonies, is testimony to the difficulty in spanning this divide between rational and institutional piety, given the sheer amount of traditional Christianity that Deism had to jettison. It may be that
Deism was the closest a Euro-American could come to atheism, an idea that was literally hard to think until Darwin’s theory of evolution provided another way of thinking, at the very least, about how it all began.  

As the empirical sciences developed sufficient social capital to turn their gaze on human history and social life, the paradigm of the rational in contrast to the irrational became an ideological tool with many uses. Not least, the objectification of religion in tandem with the expanding delineation of science created the environment for the earliest study of religion as religion. In a practice sense, religion became what science was not. The power of this dual objectification of religion and science eventually meant that as the irrational, religion was a natural object of study for the “sciences of man,” as developed by Hume, Vico and Tyler among others. Indeed, the interplay of the rational and irrational in definitions of the early sciences of religion led to some of the forms of comparative religion still practiced today—one particular line of scholars being comprised of the well-known figures of Max Müller, Sir James Frazer, and Mircea Eliade, among others—began to search for universals within the family of human religions, plural but clearly an ultimately singular entity of a profound sort—the sacred.

The effort to identify universal patterns among the world’s religions had the potential to displace Christianity as the prototypical religion for comparative purposes, substituting as UR religion. This project was continually floated, certainly in Müller, but the UR categories were never convincingly foreign or unexpected. Most of the universalists do not seem to have imagined putting Christianity aside because they thought they already had. Instead of working on insuring that project, they tended to be lured by other visions, such as taxonomy of gods that would prove a particular theory of development, an inventory of all the wisdom of the world, or
even the disclosure of that “sacred” underlying the particular forms of human religious experience.

While not threatening the Christian prototype, the era that developed “irrational religion” did in fact introduce the means for a rudimentary egalitarianism and relativism when viewing the diversity of religions. If one group was alert to the unenlightened primitive still within Christianity, the other looked for the Christian mysteries hidden in the historical experience of the pagans; the quest to grasp the universals of religion was nothing less than the key to a timeless, if vaguely familiar, sacrality expressed in all religious manifestations, making religion of this vein the most fully shared forms of human insight. Scholars today, notably the recently deceased but much quoted Roy Rappaport, will still echo with confidence the idea that uncovering the dynamics of this sacrality would explain the emergence of human-ness itself; although for Frazer and Eliade there were always hints that “the sacred” might be more ontological than phenomenological, while for Rappaport it is clearly an evolutionary development.¹⁷

Within the paradigm of the Christian prototype, the foregoing search for universals behind the irrational wisdom of religion, scholars such as Albrecht Ritschl (1822-89) and his student Ernest Troeltsh (1865-1935), who followed romantic Hegelianism, argued like many before them that Christianity was the fulfillment of history, although Troeltsh later modified his position: only in Western culture was Christianity truly “absolute.”¹⁸ Likewise, in the 20th century, beginning to devise a phenomenological approach to religion, Eliade could still suggest early in his career that in Christianity one found the most logical and fulfilling development of the symbolism of the divine expressed in all preceding religions.¹⁹ Christianity as the perfection
of the prototype found new ways to triumph even within the innovative context of religion as the irrational subject of rational scholars.

*World Religions*

The world religions paradigm has been so extraordinarily popular that it is certainly *the* way most Americans at least have come to see religion and religious multiplicity. Its popularity rests on many factors, primarily promotion by the discipline in order to solve so many problems of emphasis, logic, and cultural-centrism, when multiple religions are introduced. Even today it is still considered indispensable by too teachers in need of pedagogical tools for introducing students to a great deal of material in a manner that minimizes traditional suspicions and prejudices. Setting up a limited array of world religions—usually five through eight—can make the strange less strange; it can also invite effective questions about ideas and structures, the real fruits of comparison in any field.

Yet the paradigm always involves one major problem that readily generates resistance by some of the included traditions, namely, the "leveling" implied in making one's religion just another in a group of comparable items. While many traditions today, and historically, are comfortable with this approach, some are not. Traditional Catholics, conservative Evangelicals, and conservative Sunni Muslims would certainly hesitate to include this formula in their own school curricula; and some resent it completely—usually because of exclusivist claims. Yet another more theoretical problem could also be part of their resistance: such formulations make each religion fit a gross simplification of the prototype in very neatly explicit ways just in order to display the fact that religions are so similar in their basics, that no one of them can dominate or act as a prototype. The aura of comparable qualities is, of course, historically and theological
misleading for each religion. Finally, what does a list of eight world religions say about the other religions not included? That they are simply not large enough in the world? That they are confined to national entities and thus do hold the promise of generating a trans-national community? Or, that they do not fit the model/prototype used and so many not even technically qualify as religions after all?

These problems were painfully brought home to me, in an unexpected way, when the theologian and dedicated spokesperson for a “global ethic,” Hans Kung, came to speak at a conference on campus, bringing with him his “World Religions—Universal Peace—Global Ethic” exhibition, a series of large handsome panels. Each panel identified an explicitly world religion, provided a distinctive symbol, posted a recognizable photograph of one of its holy places, and then simply listed a series of basic facts such as the founder (or rough equivalent), the main ideas or creeds, and ritual obligations. The overall effect is to demonstrate a fundamental unity in the natural structure of these religions and, more specifically, a consensus on the message of peace that is Professor Kung’s overriding concern at this point in his career. However, Kung’s panels were drawn into a totally unrelated lecture series sponsored by the “Local Religion, Global Relationships” project of the Religious Studies Dept at Santa Clara, which studies the diversity of religious communities in Silicon Valley. The Project was having its first lecture series in which local religious leaders were invited to campus to speak for themselves about their communities and how they dealt with the pluralism of the valley. The opening reception, held prior to any of the lectures, was in the rotunda displaying Kung’s World Religions panels. I was upset when I first heard about this collision of events, but then decided to make it useful, no matter how difficult: I would ask the local religious leaders (partly using an assistant) just how they felt about representation of their traditions by the panels and the leveling.
they imposed. Their surprising answers all tended to be “no problem”; on the contrary, they were glad to be represented there at all. The fact that Christianity was only one panel among the six appeared to be a refreshing leveling to them and they found no significant fault with the information displayed. The “world religions” approach, according to the Native American Indian shaman who spoke last in the series, could easily be seen as a victory given the ubiquitous dominance of Christianity if one’s religion was included. I know their views were more than mere politeness since a number of their formal presentations of their traditions could easily have been lifted from Huston Smith’s ubiquitous pocket-size anthology, The Religions of Man.21

So the popular and over-worked pedagogical view differs from the scholar’s eye-rolling sense of the inadequacy of the world religions approach. The latter group, however, has not done much to discuss the issue in print. In 1962 Wilfred Cantwell Smith raised the problem of the inherently poor fit provided by the term “religion” when applied to the pre-modern traditions of the East, a disrespect heightened by the West’s willingness to invent names (and jurisdictions) for these traditions that do not correspond well at all to how they identify themselves.22 Jonathan Z. Smith has addressed the history and classification difficulties of the term “world religions,” but the topic had to wait until 2005 for Tomoko Masuzawa’s The Invention of World Religions for a full historical analysis of the European effects of the emergence of the paradigm.23 Masuzawa’s book will draw attention to this paradigm, forcing more self-consciousness in using it. Nonetheless, the textbooks on World Religions continue every other month, undoubtedly further efforts in a long line that have tried to unseat Huston Smith’s claim on the public and the junior college markets. In the wake of the Pluralism Project directed by Diane Eck, some are now making more use of the Web or CDs.24 Some colleagues recently generated an introductory textbook, entitled Global Religions, edited by Mark Juergensmeyer. Unfortunately, the textbook
does not use the theme of globalization to introduce a critique of the world religions approach, which the book follows in a curtailed fashion. Rather it attempts to modify our traditional understanding of these religions as neatly associated with particular geographic locales. The chapters deftly complicate the histories with diasporas and transnational ways of living, some that have been endemic since the earliest days of a community. World religions, global religions: what’s in a name, we might ask? It may be possible that this book can begin to crack open some of the tenets of the world religions paradigm; but it seems more probable, given the introduction and the marketing, which the globalization vocabulary will merely update and further secure the world religions paradigm for another generation.  

_Cultural Necessity of Religion_

After the paradigms I have described as the Christian prototype, religion as irrational, and world religions, the fourth paradigm can seem unexpected, namely, the “cultural necessity of religion.” With the emergence of anthropological studies, usually dated to E. B. Tylor (1832-1917), the attempt to determine the origins of religion (either prehistorically or as part of a total scheme for human history) gave way to analysis of religion’s continuing role in social life. In fact, the coexistence of (irrational) religious beliefs with scientific rationalism became a major question in its own right, one that further cemented the idea of “religion” as uniting all the major belief traditions from the most ancient or primitive known to revealed Christianity and all the other more or less respectable but, from the point of view of many an early European Protestant scholar, still redemption-deprived “faiths.” Given the irrational religion paradigm continuing into an even more scientific age, these religions were put on the same page, so to speak, just as it came to be understood that all religion would probably fade under influence of empirical
knowledge. Yet the social sciences asked why people were continuing to believe in great numbers when they no longer needed to do so, thereby opening up many new perspectives.

Although the encounters forged by early anthropologists got started in painfully uneven ways, the results of which we continue to uncover to this day, their comparisons of “primitive” and “civilized” societies facilitated the realization of similarities in the practice of religion that began to answer questions about its continued role. Emile Durkheim hypothesized that religion was intrinsic to the construction of the social group; Franz Boas provided cultural evidence of many forms of shared humanity especially in craft and myth; while Sigmund Freud described the formation of the modern inner self as embodying the childlike primitive, laboring under the onus of civilization. Each of these path breakers found their own rational, post-Enlightenment cultures to be built on fundamental—and socially crucial—irrationalities identifying a level of human experience shared with all manner of other populations. This diminishment of the distinctions that scholars saw among themselves, ancients, natives, and far-off exotics occurred in the age of Charles Darwin’s *Origin of the Species* (1859). If a new unity was introduced, it also brought a new disunity between “that old time religion” and the degrading theories of the over-intellectualized classes. Although some were pleased that Darwin’s theory vindicated the model of a single creation as suggested by the Bible instead of the racist theories of multiple creations used to support a natural ordering of human beings based on their color, it was a theory that otherwise appeared to divide as surely as the issues of the America Civil War that preceded its dissemination.27 In Protestant America, Darwin brought science and Christianity to a fork in the road.

As the first truly secular paradigm, the cultural necessity of religion generated a distinctive divide within the social sciences between those with theological sympathies or
affiliations in contrast to those who clearly foresaw any such loyalty to the non-scientific. Protestant anthropologists and sociologists had an easier time making their position clear than divinity school scholars, usually ordained clerics from an earlier stage of life who slowly gravitated to the social sciences; they were constantly accused of allowing the theological to degrade their analyses, although it was just as like the universalistic assumptions still so important to the social sciences in general as lingering theological ones. Yet scholars of religion in divinity schools who founded non-theological programs of studies, i.e., religionswissenschaft or history of religions, one of the major venues for the study of religion today, used the secular paradigm to create gray areas in which the social sciences and both church history and theology influenced each other, creating something that differed from either extreme. This would prove to be one angle among many from which the division between rational minds describing irrational cultures seemed less clear the more it was probed. Still, popular society was in love with the cold scientist, male or female, whom the movies obliged to fall in love with an irrational or maddeningly unconventional kook. Just as often the fatherly old scientist would embody both, rational to the point of being irrational, even savvy, in real life. By this time, life had imitated art as movie goers had become aware of the theories of the scientist of the age. Grandfatherly Einstein, father of atomic energy and critic of the bomb, genius of relativity and quantum mechanics, represented yet another “marriage” of the rational and irrational in the terms of the twentieth century. Of course, the horrific events of the century were killing off many a sacred cow owned by both science and religion.

The model of religion as a universal, indispensable, and non-rational social creation would be used by Religious Studies scholars for decades. Even the world religions paradigm was made to fit into it as well as support it. A category for the “other” primitive religions of
anthropological studies was already tacked on. The leveling equality of the “world religions” model, in addition to the social scientific “evidence” for religion as a significant marker for shared social qualities of humanity across all races and societies, certainly underscored the importance of religion in discussions of the “family of man.” But these new humanisms came at some cost. Religion was a new socio-cultural bond among the peoples of the world and an expectation if not ongoing necessity for social life only insofar as its irrationality was most pronounced. Indeed, the sciences and emerging social sciences found in religion all the irrationalities that they were intent to overcome. Aquinas’s tendency to grant the co-existence of the rational and the irrational, greatly minimized in the struggles of the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation, was nonetheless reflected in many Enlightenment theorists; however, it given way to the dominance of science and the humanistic belief in its role in freeing human beings from various forms of enslavement (such as described by Durkheim, Freud, Marx, and Spencer). This was the clearest language in which religion succumbs to history. All of these thinkers wondered how society would fare in this new mode, if it could survive at all, and many had inklings of pseudo-religions on the horizon—nationalism, industrialization, individualism, and free market capitalism, for example. The “cultural necessity of religion,” which would signify for many the moderating effects of religious values on the moralities of secular humanism, in the end haphazardly reinforced fears of these other irrationalities, while backing off from pronouncements of the demise of the irrational. Certainly the events the twentieth century helped to kill off many sacred cows—secular, religious, rational, and irrational.

*Religion as a Western Construct*
The last paradigm in the present exercise is the current evocation that religion is a Western construct. The discourse of the postmodern critique, within which this paradigm was generated, emerged during the later half of the 20th century by developing a simple logic long operative within a number of fields. Boas’s notion of culture alone contains all the sticky seeds needed to germinate this perplexed and perplexing perspective. For example, if all people are embedded within cultures and inevitably see other cultures through the lens of their own, then it stands to reason that scholars cannot see other cultures without the biases, both conscious and unconscious, which their cultural lens inevitably confer on other people’s reality. This insight enabled religion scholars to see and explore aspects of the Christian prototype at work shaping Religious Studies for the first time. For decades they had simply focused on accusations of the influence of Christian theology on their more historical and sociological efforts, and worked to expunge clearly theological tendencies. Yet so many other avenues and dilemmas opened up in the last decades of the twentieth century that exploration of the prototypical role given to Christianity was not pursued with any sustained energy or direction. Rather, the field developed a stream of work particularly preoccupied with deconstructing the idea of religion as universal and sui generis, suppositions behind the comparative world religions paradigm as well as the earlier ones, of course. Yet the religion-as-irrational paradigm, built by a long line of “natural” oppositions, was the first to begin to stumble. While pushed from many directions, feminist critical theory developed strong historical arguments and greater institutional influence. However, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) introduced another level of analysis, namely, the misreadings (some linking colonization to the conferral of feminine and irrational qualities on the colonized) that made scholarly analysis blissfully unaware of its role in maintaining the cultural biases that.
in turn, kept communities defenseless against the political encroachment of more powerful political entities with their equally powerful, and confident, sense of reality.\textsuperscript{30}

Said’s work stopped some professors in their tracks. More required a shift in the overall \textit{zeitgeist} to understand the argument and its significance. \textit{Orientalism} was soon complemented by a plethora of narrow and broad studies addressing the body, sexuality, notions of the soul, rationality, and the place of women, and even the church, in the rise of science—in other words, scholars of religion began read widely and together with other disciplines explored many of the assumptions that had helped to support the oldest paradigms for so long. Said also, if indirectly, provoked greater sensitivity to the assumptions of traditional academic research, such as the belief that there was no need to hear from those people, the “others” of their research, affected by the assumptions and ultimately the studies. As the past became less familiar territory to more than just historians, and other cultures were no longer so easily accessible to analysis, various critiques of the culture of science made even the bedrock of institutionalized rationality shift a bit.\textsuperscript{31} Some religionists tried to save the idea of religion as a universal by identifying it more fully subsuming it within culture; but the concept of culture had its own deconstructive critiques to try to survive. This period is, of course, familiar ground to readers, but the way it has been weathered by scholars of religion is still being assessed; indeed, while the concepts that have fallen and hit the ground are fairly easy to notice, it is too soon to come to any conclusion about exactly what is left standing. Yet some disciplinary history is clear.

An early and particularly humorous revelation of bias were the examples of Protestantism displayed in scholarly studies of 19\textsuperscript{th} and early 20\textsuperscript{th} centuries, particularly in regard to textual studies of ancient scriptural traditions whose modern manifestations were disdainfully dismissed as Catholic-like corruptions. Donald Lopez describes the \textit{story of the Pali text society}’s search
for the earliest, and purest, Buddhism with skill and verve; yet before him, Mary Douglas and later Jonathan Z Smith were struck by the clearly Protestant (and, therefore, anti-Catholic) bias they were finding in quite different scholarly materials.\textsuperscript{32} Still, as noted above, the main target of the deconstructive imagination was the field itself, identified with one or two ideas, but never identified by the full set of paradigms I have done so here. Titles such as \textit{The Ideology of Religious Studies, Manufacturing Religion,} and \textit{The Western Construction of Religion} testify to a healthy round of critical studies that have made the field much more aware of its complex historiography.\textsuperscript{33} However, the titles of these books bark louder than their arguments actually bite. The most extreme position, swallowed by many a religion writer with an audible gulp, was defined early on by Jonathan Z Smith when he wrote “Religion is solely the creation of the scholar’s study.”\textsuperscript{34} While waived as a banner by later critical studies of flavors, Smith’s assertion has not been clearly analyzed or challenged to date. One wonders, for example, what the vigorous section of the American population lobbying for religious causes would make of such a statement. Indeed, Smith’s understanding of “religion” may even underestimate how quickly such a term, passing out of the scholar’s window, is drawn upon in real encounters of all kinds in a variety of borderlands: travel writers composing texts of the distant and exotic; missionaries trying to explain their cultural communication problems to the “boards” back home who want news of converts; as well as the many dictionary projects that began soon after first attempts by missionaries and anthropologists alike to engage indigenous communities in talk of their beliefs.\textsuperscript{35} No matter how it was created, the idea of religion came to be was reified in line with the Christian prototype of a set of beliefs about God and quickly supplied a variety of needs incurred by the cultural diversity encountered, such as the need speak to them and of them in terms more complex than simply “the saved” and “the rest.”\textsuperscript{36}
Smith also underestimates the extensive influence of the term today. Many Muslims and Buddhists would currently be hard pressed to think of their “religions” without the categories that we might trace back to a Christian prototype and experiences of Euro-American intrusion. Indeed, defining cultural practices as religion (or vice versa) has had the unexpected result in America of protecting them by putting them on an equalizing footing under the law with Christianity and other world religions. Ogallala Sioux or Inuit fishing communities will still talk about their cultural identity in other terms than religion, such as a way of life that has come down to them from their ancestors and not just a set of beliefs; but then many of them were forced to convert to Christianity and the distinction between their religion and their culture is a solution to how to maintain the latter and acknowledge the realities of the former.37

In this way the postmodern critique of modernism facilitated numerous inquires into assumptions that formed the Christian prototype for religion in general, adding to more long-standing questions about the comparative aspects of the “world religions” paradigm and providing the context for debates that have destabilized the notion of scientific truth determined the rational and irrational. The latter debates left both sides of the Enlightenment dichotomy of science and religion as historical constructions that do not always, and have not always, fit the circumstances with which scholars understood themselves to be dealing. Yet Said’s demonstration of the construction of bodies of knowledge used by Western powers for agendas that spoke to cultural progress and political domination on the one hand, and spoke for the colonized as their best hope for all the benefits of Western civilization on the other (salvation then, trade now?), inevitably led to a reflexive habit: is Said’s picture of the power of European discourse about the Orient, disorienting as it originally was, just a bit too empowering its description of effective agency? What continuities does this black box have with the others
identified above? Said's study is old enough that a developed critique of it has moved the conversation into more parsed realities that this essay has any business enumerating. Although the ruckus over globalization—for, against, reality, mirage, historically “old hat,” etc.—it shows how difficult it will be to avoid meta-narratives in which the interests of a dominant culture are projected as reality, as the future, as the excellent outcome for all who cooperate--or the cause of unprecedented poverty and even environmental degradation.

Even a short stretch of service in the scholarly professions today is sufficient to teach one that today’s corrections (one would have written “truth” twenty-five years ago) are tomorrow’s examples of short-sightedness. Compare the literature that began about twenty-years ago on the scholar’s obligation with regard to cultural products of colonized and conquered peoples that are plundered to end up in museum collections or the black market that encourages more plunder. It was clear that a thoughtful person could not encourage the destructive vandalism of archeological sites by buying a truly old museum-quality pot from the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico. Yet in a recent essay, Kwame Anthony Appiah, reflecting on the “cultural patrimony” of his native Ghana, makes a much more nuanced if unexpected argument for the repatriation when goods are looted from people with known names and clear cultural links, but the validity of why “the British Museum’s claim to be repository of the heritage not of Britain but of the world.” That view strikes him as “exactly right,” although Appiah would be more comfortable with their continued residence there if the treasures of a vanished civilization are indeed shared more widely. 38 Of course, the deadly details will be those arguments about whether a culture has truly vanished or continued in some form.

It is not clear where the study of religion is going, as so many new books are quick to say. but the choices have always appeared limited. The field might define “religion” in a narrow
manner, reflecting either strict specifics of content or style of practice (belief in a supernatural being, which is quite true for all systems of religious-like practice) or historical criteria suiting its emergence in the Christian dominated world of late medieval Europe (related to being bound by vows in thirteenth century sources). Or it may suppose a universality that could never be proven, but posit an open “family of resemblances” with which to describe the commonalities. The field may abandon the term as an historical artifact and place analytic weight on “culture” or “tradition,” hoping they can do the job. As a fourth alternative, it might agree that the European roots of the notion of religion have been transcended by cultural contacts that have spread the concept and encouraged a rapidly varying set of nuances in how, why and when it is used. One reveals one’s hand in making any such list, so I acknowledge that this conclusion project is part of a current project, although it suggests a project tracing some major main lines of transmission, translation and usage that are beyond my plans despite how exciting I find the idea.

There is, however, yet another option and it is a real one facing the field, even if it is currently hard to make sense of. Generated by a diverse set of voices, almost all emanating from the sciences, sociology to neurology, there is fresh mobilization to cast “religion” as a universal, adaptive, cognitive property in the evolution of the history of the human race. With a seductive confidence in the certainty of their claims and frequently embarrassing naiveté as to what has been said in a century of social scientific work, this broad line of theorizing has enough new science at its disposal to be more than a curious diversion, but much less than developed, paradigmatic view. Aside from a small group of rational choice theorists, represented by Rodney Stark, the posthumous influence of the anthropologist Roy Rappaport’s enormous study of ritual, and a few books by Ilkka Pyssiäinen, who is said to have been trained in theology and comparative religion, there is a group of cognitive theorists who see themselves as indebted to
Pascal Boyer, and another group who see themselves as more broadly revising the social sciences, represented well if not solely by Stephen Turner.39

The rational choice and Boyer cognitive theorists are apt to claim “finally” to put the study of religion on a scientific footing, with each heralding a new naturalism or taking credit for a “new science” of religion (there have been so many!). These scholars intend to address religion in a more disciplined manner (than whom?) using the newer (really newer?) tools of economic or cognitive precision. Yet so far the confidence of both rational choice and cognitive theory has rested in great part on a total reluctance to address any definitions beyond the most self-evident—and self-serving—ones. The referents for religion, capital, and piety, for example, are all clear-cut and unexamined—as is the method’s location in any ideological paradigm. They distinguish themselves with small modifications of their definition of religion as belief in supernatural beings, Superhuman Agency, or Counter-Intuitiveness. The works of Daniel Dennett, David Wilson Sloan and Stephen Turner appear to engage in little of the ideological shadow boxing with traditional scholars of religion that mars the scholars who follow in the footsteps of Boyer.40 With exceptions here and there, the more enthusiastic scientists tend to ignore previous classics in the study of religion, ready to start out fresh with what they do—evolutionary biology or neurology, cognitive psychology, and so on. The popularity of these theorists at conferences at least signals interest in more constructive ways of thinking that are not excessively self-reflexive and bring, perhaps, the certainty of “that old time science.”

In general, as this fresh mobilization of science wrests the study of religion from its traditional handlers, most of those handlers have moved on themselves, notably with work on social memory as developed by Paul Connerton and Danielle Hervieu-Leger, as well as the social ramifications of agency or cognitive programming on religious experience as seen in
studies by Ann Taves and Robert N. McCauley and E. Thomas Lawson. Using practice and performance theory, others have focused less on the mental states long thought to define religion and more on the creative activities. All of these groups have opened up just some of the most identifiable fronts in the study of religion. It is an open question to what extent they will avoid some of the knots that have defined that study for so long. Avowed atheism or scientific precision is certainly not going to do it. In too many of these theorists, there is a palpable eagerness to overcome the pesky challenges of postmodernist paradigm’s view of the Western construction of religion. To the extent that it is not taken seriously, the new fronts in religion may turn out to be very familiar; certainly the popularity at conferences of those cognitive theorists who are each inventing a new science of religion signals interest in ways of thinking that are not excessively self-reflexive and bring, perhaps, the certainty of “that old time science.”

Tilting at Paradigms

In one form or another, the five paradigms described above are constants in the discipline of History as well as Religious Studies. They demonstrate the staying power of major models over centuries, the type of enduring resiliency that has created fields of study, absorbed repeated challenges, and stubbornly resisted abandonment. Feuerbach, that 19th century theologian-turned-Hegelian-turned philosophical anthropologist of religion, put it with a simplicity that Marx would echo: “man does not dominate his fundamental conception of the world; on the contrary, it is it that dominates him, animates him, determines, and governs him.” We do not have ideas about the world so much as they have us. But Feuerbach’s nineteenth century pessimism eventually gave way to twentieth century confidence that if we cannot change things we can
imagine them in our own image, as far from static. Fundamental conceptions may absorb
repeated challenges, but they morph more regularly to avoid such challenges.

So how does one deal with the paradigms I have isolated? The process of going from a
paradigm important to the discipline to a problematic way of thinking that should be left behind
(no parallel to the career span of a professor intended!) is not encouraged by Feuerbach or even
Kuhn. Kuhn’s analysis of the replacement of scientific paradigms may not be completely
descriptive of the more diverse methods and interests of the humanities and social sciences, but I
do not think it seriously misleads. In brief, he argued that an old paradigm is not an old paradigm
until there is a new one to replace it, one that already has substantial support. People do not
throw out a way of thinking to leave themselves dependent on one person’s method; they
certainly will do nothing to make their own previous work suddenly retrograde. A challenge to
an aging paradigm will be viewed as something more promising than tilting at windmills only if
it entails a clearly developed alternative way of thinking already constructively productive for
more than a few. And that would only be the beginning: whoever started the paradigm toppling
would probably not recognize, or enjoy, the working result.

It might be interesting to illustrate the difficulties of challenging a paradigm with a
personal example. My projects on ritual, textuality and, most recently, belief, are not a set of
integrated arguments, but they are analogous examples of engagements with reigning
assumptions and they present some amusing lessons.

My work on ritual is my most complete challenge since it even included an attempt at a
constructive alternative. I tried to dismantle the 19th century construction of ritual as a universal
phenomenon, considered utterly distinct in its structural mode of action and, inevitably,
dependent on all of our unexamined assumptions about thought and action. I wrote two books on
the topic before I realized that there was a deeper, core paradigm shaping the notion of ritual that made my study into a set of wooden arrows bouncing harmlessly off a steel tank, namely, the idea of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the endlessly mystifying act of violence at the heart of religion (especially with Christianity as the model) and, in theory, the fount of all other modes of ritual action, such as initiation, offerings, prayers, and sacred dramas. Not realizing that sacrifice was the thread to pull, I simply addressed it in passing to avoid giving it the traditional degree of attention. Intent on challenging the basic assumption of the uniqueness of ritual, I took the contrary view—analyzing ritual activities as fully within the context of all other forms of social action. If ritual is not a uniquely different way of acting, that is, lacking a particular universal structure, then the questions shift to what is the difference between ritual and other ways of acting and, very key to my mind, when and why would people decide to do ritual acts instead of something else. I depicted ritual as one type of social praxis, namely, “practices of ritualization,” and even used a "control," so to speak, by comparing a ritual way of acting to “theorizing” as yet another type of social action. In the end, this all meant that I defined general characteristic principles of practice, and then explored how ritual distinctly played with these principles (as did theorizing). I emerged with examples of how people effectively ritualize a set of otherwise normal actions and explain why that can be a strategic way of acting in particular types of some situations. In addition, I tried to account for the mythic view of “unchanging” tradition (which is the preferred focus or context for most ritualizing) as well as all the many ad hoc ritual activities—religious, civic, and familial—that people consciously and unconsciously deploy in their lives.

Needless to say, I was not successful in single-handedly providing a new understanding of sacrifice. The attraction of the concept may be hard to convey, but it crops up in some widely
popular form almost every decade. My career alone has seen three sacrifice fads. There recently was René Girard’s psycho-theological theory of the murdered scapegoat, and a decade and a half before him, Georges Bataille’s notion that the profane, when taken to transgressive extremes such as sacrificial killing (or self-mutilation), mysteriously transforms itself into an experience of the sacred. On the basis of those ideas alone, I should have gone back to take on sacrifice explicitly. The concept is certainly relevant in public religious and political life, for example, the ritualization of terrorism in orchestrated acts by which Palestinian "sons" are sacrificed, instead of the ram, in acts of terrorism against Jews. The ritual can be seen as an attempt to sacralize the political struggle for "the land" in a manner that undermines the sacralization claimed by Jewish settlers and, indeed, the government of Israel.

Meanwhile, in a third style, studies of sacrifice as the classic example of unique ritual action continue to be written. Invited to join a prestigious anthology of terms, the editors gave me the topic of “performance,” included “sacrifice,” leaving ritual out altogether. The recent vogue is exemplified by the late anthropologist, Roy Rappaport, in a lengthy posthumous volume that describes ritual as “the social act basic to humanity,” the act that at the dawn of human history, and even today, that socializes the merely human into true humanity. This formulation has begun to appear in many popular forms. Surprisingly, Robert Bellah has given an exceptional show of support for Rappaport’s nearly mystical and ultimately apocalyptic paean to the power of ritual. His defense of Rappaport is eventually followed by a critique of my analysis of “ritualizing” as fundamentally nihilistic, as if I were denying the existence of real acts of ritual simply by challenging the idea of a uniquely-structured entity behind the name. Ritual (sacrifice), as the cornerstone of human evolutionary adaptation, will be around awhile as a trendier version of the previous ideas.
Overall, therefore, I am not impressed with any ground gained in my first extended bout with a paradigm. I have learned to take the romanticism of ideas for scholars much more seriously; my understanding of theorizing is leading, I hope, to a fuller analysis. However, I also tried to explore the shape of paradigm in a project on the nature of textuality in China. I saw textuality as invoking distinct cosmological structures, although the focus on Chinese texts was due to my own love of their aesthetic materiality, as well as the conviction, now commonplace, that the particular form of written language would generate a different text-supporting cosmos than that of the European Bible. In the historical saga of the latter, one of the main themes is the story of how the writing conquers orality, the priests defeat the prophets, the messiah dies to live on in the Reformation Biblical text. In Chinese history, an early divinatory cosmos and spoken words of the masters become bound in commentary until new sources of texts were found in new layers of the cosmos, an imaginative development that followed the introduction of Buddhism. Printing affected both Europe and China quite differently at first, but more similarly over time. What is the significance in all this, I wondered, for the medium, the message, the power structure, and competition of cosmological visions? I could go on to link these issues to the introduction of the Bible in China and the profound effect of the first Western books in a culture in which community groups would collect stray bits of scrap paper, especially with writing on them, and bring them baskets to burn at the temple for “merit,” a notion that appeared in the cosmos of China’s earliest scribes. An account of the religious text in China would show up the influence of a paradigm about the Biblical cosmos and its effect on the nature and authority of texts even into the modern era—that is, through the Reformation, which made the text everything and in the process gave birth to the sciences of textual analysis. Protestantism and our cultural paradigm involve the tension between the sacred and the analyzed text. There is a master narrative in
which the history of writing and printing in Europe is basically taken to describe how it happens elsewhere. This narrative led Benedict Anderson to remark: “I was startled to discover, in many notices of Imagined Communities, that this Eurocentric provincialism remained quite undisputed.” 48

I am currently exploring another set of paradigms within the concept of belief, in part as an effort to keep my scholarship in tune with how most religious people today see themselves and define their practices. However, other colleagues probing the field have focused on the discourse surrounding the “cultural necessity of religion” paradigm and noted the stubborn tendency of religion scholars to treat religion as always a good thing. Of course, religion scholars are not fools; we know that religion is not always doing good, but assumptions about its fundamental moral nature is certainly another black box that convolutes our thinking.49 Over the years there has been talk about self-imposed constraints or censoring due to the institutions sponsoring our scholarship or even our own earliest loyalties. Striking a very basic note, Jonathan Z. Smith argued, in connection with his study of Jonestown, that we should study religions we did not like; others echoed and pushed this unaccustomed perspective.50 Recently, however, Robert Orsi offered a very simple critical formulation, saying that scholars of religion are wedded to the idea that religion is good.51 Whenever it is not acting well, we explain it away until the incident is no longer religion but something else—political extremism, a personality cult, degenerate or demented discontents, and so on. Orsi analyzes this tendency in an argument about the moral responsibilities of a researcher, and proposes a new formulation for the stance of the participant-observer studying religion acting badly. His point may be the beginning of a fuller challenge to a paradigm that may be even more basic than the one with which I began, Christianity as the prototype.
Historians surely have other paradigms particular to their perspective, which bring their own tricks of vision while generating the scholarship we study and teach--such as the box behind the truism that not knowing history dooms one to repeat it. One historian tells me that this adage it is wrong, wrong, wrong; situations are never really alike--Iraq is not Vietnam. Yet it all depends on the point to be made, the frame that is imposed, the context created by the discourse underway. Taking the long view, paradigms are born and surely some fade away in time. It seems proper that our disciplinary resources get past second-guessing the latest intellectual fad and, using all tools, work to keep the larger picture in view. This is best done now as it has always been, with the thick description of cross-cultural studies and the cross-disciplinary interaction of scholars.
ENDNOTES


6Thanks to Jim Ketelaar for bringing to my attention the Japanese term *shinkyo*, devised in the nineteenth century to designate religion in general.

7While maintaining the anonymity of my young colleague, he was a member of Yi Fo Sheng and the Chi Jui Foundation, trained as a minister in the Sangha Council of Southern California.


11For arguments about whether Polo ever really reached China, see Frances Woods, Did Marco Polo Ever Go to China? (Boulder, Co.: Westview, 1996). Whether he went or not, the numerous reprinted and possibly expanded editions, over the course of the next few centuries made his four stereotypes applicable, however clumsily, to the wider exotic world.

12Polo quotes Kubilai, the Great Khan, as saying: "There are four great Prophets who are worshipped and to whom all the world does reverence. The Christians say that their God was Jesus Christ, the Saracens Mahomet; the Jews Moses, and the idolaters Sakyamuni Burkhan who was the first to be represented as God in the form of an idol. And I do honour and reverence to all four, so that I may be sure of doing it to him who is greatest in heaven and truest; and to him I pray for aid." For this quote, and the wonderful discussion of the excellent manners of the Chinese "pagans" that Polo met, see Marco Polo: The Travels, trans. Ronald Latham (New York: Penguin, 1958), 119, 160-61.

13Latham, 20-21; for one example, among many, of the cruel Saracens and the valiant Christians, see p. 305.
Preus, 17, demonstrates a growing European understanding of the inevitable relativism brought about by the diversity they were encountering, and the various ways in the earliest thinkers responded to the interpretive challenge.


The exhibit is sponsored by the Global Ethic Foundation in Tübingen. A descriptive brochure was published in 2000, trans. John Bowden, but the Foundation is the result of a programmatic book entitled *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic*, published by Hans Kung (New York: Crossroads Press, 1991). There are actually 12 panels but only six were shipped for this occasion.


Mark C. Juergensmeyer, *Global Religions: An Introduction* (Oxford 2003) states that the text is only “part of a larger project in which some sixty scholars have written on the diversity of religious traditions,” entitled, *A Handbook of Global Religions* (13). The final chapter of the volume is startling, although perhaps too much should not be read into it. It is a posthumous essay in which Ninian Smart addresses the possibility of a future global religion. It is a concern and style of presentation (with its particular rendition of the Christian prototype) that hearkens back to an older generation within the field. If these concerns are not shared by the editor, his sense of filiality may not have served the volume very well. Juergensmeyer also contributes to bit of rewriting of the history of the field when he credits Ninian Smart with being one of the “founders of the modern field of religious studies” (12). It is, first of all, a meaningless statement due to the lack of any context and content.
Preus’s strongly held thesis that (irrational) religion has effectively hidden a tradition of rational inquiry, threatening its existence, detracts from a very insightful and sensitive readings of the authors he discusses.

Menand’s *The Metaphysical Club* presents a fine, extended argument concerning the interaction of the religion with the racial ramifications of these two pre-Darwinian scientific theories.

This was arguably the first period in Euro-American history when atheism could be a rational position. Darwin’s theory provided a biological explanation of life that could displace or rival that of the Book of Genesis, lack of which had always kept many a scientific rationalist a quasi-biblicalist with regard to the origin of life and the universe.

The most consistent example of this critique is Donald Weibe, as in his *The Politics of Religious Studies: The Continuing Conflicts with Theology in the Academy* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1999).


Fitzgerald; Russell T. McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Daniel


35 For examples of the use of the term during Columbus’s encounters in the New World, see Tzvetan Todorov’s *The Conquest of America*, trans. Richard Howard (Harper and Row, 1984); in the arguments of Bartolome de la Casas (do the natives have a religion to be respected or none so they are ready for conversion), see *Witness: Writings of Bartolomé de Las Casas*, ed. George Sanderlin (Orbis, [1971], 1992).

36 *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* identifies “religion” with 13th century uses in regard to holy orders or persons, like monks, who had “bound” (a probable root word) themselves to a set of rules (s.v. “religion,” vol. 2: 410).


42 Cited in DuBuisson, 198.


49 One example of a thorough attempt to see how religion works to justify violence, see Mark Juergensmeyer’s *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, rev. ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).

50 Jonathan Z. Smith, “The Devil in Mr. Jones,” in *Imagining Religion*, 102-120.

Religion – Constructing the West  
(But What about the Rest?)

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Since I do not know my audience, it might be tactful to preface this talk with a friendly warning about the sort of thing you are going to get. Recently an eminent sociologist of religion used the conclusion of a short survey of new theories on society and culture to single me out for a position of which he wanted no part, namely, a trendy skepticism that bordered on complete nominalism (actually, I think he meant nihilism given the critique). Of course, to me, his was a fairly thorough misreading of my argument, but we all know “every reading is a misreading,”¹; I am guilty of misreadings too, but not nominalism, skepticism but not nearly young enough to be trendy. My argument here is an historical one about cultural definitions. I want to unwrap, as accurately as I can, how the idea of religion -- that this is religion but that is something else, magic or civic duty -- was constructed in Western culture, a construction that few would deny was, in many ways, constitutive of Western culture. It is an argument that has some application to current realities.

The prominent part that religion is playing in the news—from stories about global threats of terrorism to the local politics of state school board decisions (Intelligent Design vs Evolution)—is such that one can conclude that religions are cultures, even quite distant cultures despite the radical proximity – or impingement – that is so casual in this era. Samuel Huntington’s has been much-critiqued for his suggestion of a coming “clash” of religious civilizations. Well, he may probably prove incorrect in the long term; but in the short term we
are certainly caught up in smaller clashes now almost everywhere there are religious subcultures, even within populations that have many other ties uniting them.

According to the history we teach, with the 18th century Enlightenment religion became formally distinct from the state, and that distinction curtailed its control over society. This curtailment allowed social developments that had been previously seen, at times, as anti-Christian, such as early scientific pursuits and civic citizenship for those of other religions or sectarian groups -- ultimately what we know as secular society itself. But today it is said that we are seeing “fundamentalist” movements rising to reject these secular arrangements, to challenge the containment of religion and refuse modernity as Europe and America have developed it. And should these fundamentalisms have their way, creating an evangelical Christian America or a subdivided Iraq, clashing with its neighbors, then how long before there would be global size clashes? Religion might even succeed in accomplishing the horror that the cold war avoided.

When I start ruminating along these lines I run smack into an old “confusion” – like a messy room that one tries to avoid seeing. It is a basic confusion about the very meaning “religion” has come to have in the world, and I fear there can be no neat map for understanding it. As a “seasoned” professor of the subject, you might not expect me to have a profound perplexity about the very subject of my expertise, but who better? I don’t particularly want to hand you my confusions (in fact, I would rather like to think yours are further along than mine), but I do want to make sure you understand how the global situation you and I have to deal with relies to a great degree on the meanings we give religion.

I do not think that there is going to be a great global clash of civilizations, but I do think there will be constant clashes among any number of subcultures, spurred by religious idealism or conservatism at least as much as the protection of economic or national interests. They will happen again with school boards here in the States, they will build up in a demographically
changing Europe, and they will define much of life in the Middle East and Africa. The stakes in these clashes will involve resources like oil, water, farmland, or sheer political leverage; but many the arguments and some of the long-term goals will hinge on people’s understanding of their religions.

So, in a nutshell, the point of my talk today is to try to provide a description of the historical-conceptual background that Euro-Americans carry in regard to religion. My description is an argument for what the term religion has come to mean for us and how that has happened. The argument also suggests that these Euro-American meanings might differ from or influence others. I have to believe, when my confusion threatens to get out of hand, that the more self-understanding we bring to any cultural clash, the more we will engage the people and the issues, not the rhetoric that packages things. So, you see, academics are always caught in a dialectic of idealism and skepticism.

1. Paradigms

There are, I believe, a handful of paradigms or sets of assumptions that one can demonstrate the history and structure of our understanding of religion. I use the term paradigm in its most neutral sense. While often blamed for constraining thought, paradigms clearly function as our most basic tool for advancing knowledge as a social enterprise. Paradigms are those overly convenient and under-theorized sets of terms that create the scaffolding for a whole litany of interconnected ideas. Eventually, however, we notice this very opportune assistance and become suspicious that reality could so neatly fit our needs; we suspect that the inner scaffolding may have its own history of construction and even ideological uses. From this perspective, to call something a paradigm is to recognize it as a type of “black box” operating in our discourse; and we are obliged catch hold of such boxes and inquire "what are you and why are you here?"
RADICAL INTERPRETATION IN RELIGION
By Nancy Frankenberry

C Bell

"'The Chinese Believe in Spirits': Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion"
Chinese Believe In Spirits

Summary

Spate of recent books
Field’s lack of involvement
Rodney Needham
Commonplace: belief is sooo Christianity-centered; comparison is distortion
Belief=culture, problems left
Philosophical uses: more individual oriented than anthro
   Needham: Hume to Harnack
   Davidson’s radical interpretation: interconnectedness of beliefs and meaning
   Their relationship to interpretation, need to infer them
   Granting others reason/truth simply to decide about truth about them

Level of sentence
Threat to multiple truths

Universal and particular
Davidson tries to hold on to both:
   truth dependent on language/culture vs shared rationalism that enables us to interpret the
   meaning of statements
Same project in philosophical ethics
Richard Schweder: relativivism vs universalism => all the diff positions
   In order to elucidate a post-modernist anthropology
   Answer: transcendence w/o superiority
HR=tension betw universalism and particularism
   Scholarship as a vehicle for identifying particularism and forging abstract
Universalisms

Belief: recent def of rel as an over-reaching folk category that misreads & does violence
to other cultures: corrective yes, leaves problems
First, we have by now created “religion” in general and it is out and about
Second, even cultures like China can find examples of belief
“Our language about belief and meaning is part of an understanding of religion that keeps
reasserting itself because a tense relationship universalism and particularism may be integral to
all theoretical projects as we culturally construct them” 105 (tho some projects do try to undo our
cultural assumptions about knowledge)

=our characterization of the specific illusions of others; shorthand for that which is most culture­
bound, determined, particular. Three assumptions:
1) cultural beliefs explained (not be ref to a universal!) by reconstructing the system in which
they “mean”; do not exist in our views, so no other route for meaning; thus a coherent system of
beliefs creates the meaningful structure, religion (106) Circularity of all this makes it work for us
2) deeply held mental orientation or conviction: all or nothing
Both assumptions basic to Schweder’s treatment of the “witch” questions, = central anthro
question and faultline, no more anthro if every answered. Reconstructing the system of ideas in
which his statement makes sense means what in the end? That he is a witch, right?
3) we grant belief a priority to action (discussed elsewhere)

Coherence – recent quality for the meaningfulness of a system (Berger), also what religion should provide,
that is, meaningful coherence (but students have not found it; nor clergy;
Beliefs as specific sets of actions, as social practice versus a T/F linguistic statement or
Looking at how people are religious: very little coherence, instead
“Bundles of behaviors” or “habits of action” by which most situations are dealt with
Meaningfulness more a matter of family, jobs, or service projects; religion used merely to
buttress them; of course, just a particular expectation of religion
Articulating the similarities and differences among how groups expect religion to provide
meaning – how is this possible? Davidson’s “principle of charity” behind interpretation

Chinese Believe in Spirits
Like Long Island residents, much variation in types and degrees of beliefs
Historical examples
Individual aware of variation & have a sense of choice & no coherence
Chinese society is quite diverse, history of cultural traffic
Contrasts w Rosaldo’s isolated Ilongot (really, no debate over heads?)

Religion
People constantly asking themselves what to believe, how much, with what degree of investment,
questions that we ask about religion, but everyone asks them about stocks, politicians, school
boards, etc. Still, these questions concern cultural boundaries of religion, always in flux.
Examples: Wolf’s crazy non-shaman; Falungong on rel or exercise
In fact, a coherently organized system of beliefs is a very deliberate creation, a product prepared
for a purpose. Shanshu stress coherence in their project to present a universal system
Test of hypothesis: A Wolf’s ethnography of grades of spirit currency as corresponding
to a culturally deep understanding mirroring the social landscape... but suggestive at best.
Little coherence among beliefs hold, accdg to few studies. [Even though we tend to
believe about believers that what they want most is a sense of systematic coherence in the cosmos
Of course, my own research, finds beliefs not prior to religious action, but sort of parallel
or resulting from.
Religion implies a false coherence or systematization: “We cannot appeal to belief to describe
how people exist within their cultures; yet without belief, it is not clear what we mean by
religion.” 115
“Bundle of behaviors” known as feng-shui? Traveled to American culture very easily, w which
its congruence is minimal at best. Cp martial arts, taiqi, zen
Appreciation historicity of our categories: If notion of religion seems to fall apart in one
place, it resurfaces in another: Christian evangelicals

Conclusion: coherence or incoherence can be explored on a more realistic footing if scholarship can let go
of the transcendence status still clutched by Schweder or the logically prior theory of interpretation sought
by Davidson. But we will have to spend more time figuring out how to situate ourselves.

[A discipline, like philosophy or religious studies, exists primarily to save us the work of figuring out
where and how we can situate ourselves. It lets us take it for granted that we have a vista, a place to stand,
and a small soap box from which to expound in ways that do not seem ridiculous, at least to those
sharing most of the same cultural categories.]
"The Chinese Believe In Spirits": Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion

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A recent round of books, both popular and scholarly, reveal that as a society we are, once again, fascinated with the issue of belief. While the more popular books tend to adopt a fairly straightforward and uncomplicated notion of believing and then find major problems of rationality, the more scholarly books readily accept a type of rationality to beliefs while problematizing the act of believing in other, more involved ways. Both types of arguments remind the scholar of religion that the academic discipline of religious studies has not contributed much to this discussion for quite awhile. As described in Rodney Needham's 1972 work, Belief, Language and Experience, which was both a fulsome anthropological treatment of the problems and a cautionary tale for further studies, the concept of belief poses particular problems for comparative analysis since belief does not appear to be identifiable or similarly important in religions we want to compare and from which we want to abstract more general descriptions. Moreover, it is a commonplace that many of our assumptions about the centrality of belief in religion have emerged in a decidedly Christian context, making comparison a distortion of other religious views. Anthropological studies since Needham have tended to collapse belief into 'culture', which has worked well enough most of the time, but it not only avoids the explicit problem of why and how 'beliefs' and 'believing' become prominent in the way in which many people participate in a culture, it also retreats from the problem of various ways in which any one person may appropriate parts of the culture. Recourse to the concept of culture not only leaves many of these questions to popular writers, it also tends to push anthropology into an extreme cultural relativism that is painfully dependent upon the fragile and often unarticulated nature of this idea of culture. Scholars of religion, on the other hand, generally want to use the language of belief to say that members of such-and-such a religion generally hold such-and-such conceptions that motivate their activities. While people have pointed to the overriding need for such an abstract language despite ongoing revelations of its weaknesses, we also know that a term like belief keeps tying together meta-language to assumptions that are more culturally constrained than we really care to defend.

Another reason for the field's hesitation about belief may also lie in philosophical uses of the term. Philosophical usage tends to emphasize a more individualistic version of anthropology's 'culture,' and in so doing deals, at least in passing, with the possibility of idiosyncrasy, madness, or the intent to delude. Philosophers seeking a language with which to analyze how human beings go about interpreting their world, particularly the linguistic communications within it, often make use of the concept of belief to link it to, or play it off, a notion of truth. Needham discussed the links and distinctions drawn between belief and truth in the philosophical tradition stretching from Hume to Wittgenstein, Hampshire, and Harnack. More recently, Donald Davidson has made liberal use of belief in his theory of "radical interpretation." He argues that we cannot make sense of a person's utterances without understanding something of their intentions and beliefs, but "we cannot infer the belief without knowing the meaning, and have no chance of inferring the meaning without the belief." His theory of radical interpretation, therefore, assumes the interconnectedness of belief and meaning as well as their formal role in interpretation. For the sake of his larger argument, essentially a theory about a theory, Davidson focuses on the belief (or 'preference'), integral to interpretation, that the statements made by another are or can be true. In fact, he points out, we must grant other speakers, however aberrant or idiosyncratic, a great deal of reason and truth, or else we would...
have no way to conclude they are being unreasonable or untrue. Davidson goes on to propose a theory of how we infer belief and meaning, arguing that the inference that statements can be held to be true cannot be separate from this basic theory of interpretation. However, philosophical discussions like Davidson's, which relate belief and meaning to truth, however truth is understood, not only seem to threaten religious studies' post-theological emphasis on the validity of different world views, they also appear to threaten to push analysis to the level of the sentence, from where is appears hard to come to any conclusions about religion in general.

Despite these fears, the question of how to use the concept of belief and how to identify the types of phenomenon potentially illuminated by such a concept remain an inescapable aspect of studying religion within the language traditions that the field of religious studies inherits. This essay, which is for me both an initial and perhaps belated foray into the topic, will explore some unarticulated tendencies in the our use of the notion of belief, and tie our use of this concept to a particular way of thinking about religion. In the end, I will sketch a possible way to approach these issues from a rather different direction.

Universal and Particular

A particularly provocative dimension of Davidson's analysis of interpretation is the attempt to hold on to two positions that are usually polarized in such a way as to force a choice of one over the other. On the one hand, he invokes truth (or reality) as clearly dependent on language (or culture), a stance that supports many current understandings of cultural pluralism and relativism, which are compelling and popular positions these days. On the other hand, Davidson also points to a type of shared rationalism that enables us to recognize and interpret the meaning of statements made by others even when the linguistic or cultural overlap is very thin. By holding on to both positions, Davidson attempts to find something of a middle way or, rather, as he puts it, to place theories of interpretation on a new footing. I have read Davidson primarily for this struggle to hold on to both positions in ways that make sense of what we are looking in the study of religion: sometimes it feels like we are encountering very different realities that lead us to question our own; at other times, we experience, and point to, a great deal of similarity, although we can get nervous about that too. In both cases, we wonder what is inevitably particular and what, if anything, is, has been, or is becoming universal.

When reduced to this formulation, however, Davidson's project is one that is widely shared at the moment. Philosophical ethics, in particular, may be doing the most explicit work on how to think about cultural relativism without endorsing complete relativism, but there are and have been other engagements. Among anthropologists, few have tried to imagine a more explicit convergence of relativism and universalism than Richard Shweder. In several studies in the 1980s, he groped to identify all the presuppositions of these polarized positions by delineating and classifying a wide variety of formulations of each. By making transparent what he saw as the main tensions in the field, Shweder hoped to elucidate the basic stance and components of a post-positivist, postmodern anthropology. I do not think his conclusion — that anthropological theorists should adopt a "transcendence without superiority" from which they should "take 'literally' (as a matter of belief) those reality-positis so alien in order to discover other realities within the self" — is either satisfying or successful. Yet the effort was fascinating, instructive, and bold.

Religious studies, especially the history of religions, has also addressed the issue of universalism and particularism and, like most academic fields, it has probably been formed by the tension between them. The differentiation of the study of religion from theology more than fifty years ago was one early engagement of the issue, by which an emerging "history of religions" approach felt its way to what was arguably a type of universalized theology and a fresh, if incomplete, particularization of Christianity and its siblings. When the field began to focus more on methods of comparison, it took another angle on these polarized options, asking several related questions: if all religions are comparable manifestations of some type of...
universal, such as *homo religiosus* or the sacred, should we be comparing to illuminate the universal or the particular or, somehow, both? And what can be adequately compared to what for what end? With the more recent emergence of linguistic and cognitive theories, as well as studies effectively deconstructing universal narratives, one wonders if there is any other issue so responsible for what we do and how we do it today. In no small way, scholarship understands itself as both a vehicle for identifying particularism (we sometimes regarded ourselves as "liberating") and forging formulations of an underlying or abstract universalism. The emphasis may shift back and forth, but each, as Davidson might suggest, is impossible to infer without the other.

Belief

According to recent critiques, 'religion' is an over-reaching folk category that misreads and even does violence to other cultures. This is, of course, a corrective, and undoubtedly a slightly exaggerated one, which has the merit of addressing the many liberties we have taken with the term for so long. Yet these critiques leave two concerns unanswered.

First, several centuries of talking about 'religion in general' has created a sense of religion in many places that might, arguably, have categorized things differently without such influence. It is not so easy to recontain the term 'religion' at this point in history. It may be just another form of hegemonic imperialism to claim, for example, that the Chinese today are wrong or deluded in using the word 'religion' to describe either past or current practices in their culture. If we are to be clear about the historicity of such terminology, we must follow through and track how the concept is being used today beyond our own theorizing. We know there are no platonic theoretical categories, but we keep thinking we can freeze them for this study or that critique.

Second, work in the materials of a culture that has long constituted a good example of classifications that do not fit the Euro-American understanding of religion, namely China. Yet if one looks beyond the careful slices of Chinese culture that are usually chosen as representative, one can find much that is not completely alien to any definition of 'religion,' medieval, enlightenment, or postmodern. It can be refreshing, of course, to drop the notion of religion out of the picture as completely as possible, and either explore the variety of Chinese categories that have been used or fish for other ways of identifying what is either comparable or distinguishable among practices.

These concerns notwithstanding, the attempt to demote 'religion' from a universal (the "consensus of nations"), a biological facility, or a cognitive structure to a theory of the specific classificatory organization of a particular culture helps to illuminate some of the problems attending our language of belief and meaning. In the same way, I want to suggest, our language about belief and meaning is part of an understanding of religion that keeps reasserting itself because of a tense relationship between universalism and particularism — whether or not it is the type of solution sought by Davidson and Shweder, among others, may be integral to theoretical projects as we have culturally cast them. Even if we pay full attention to the historicity of the social system examined as well as the historicity of the project of examining it, it is not clear that we secure a footing for scholarship that drops the allure of transcendence as another version of the particularism-universalism polarity.

While we have tended to use 'religion' to denote a dimension of open-ended commonality, something found in most if not all human cultures, we have used the term 'belief' in the highly tailored, supporting role of denoting the culturally particular foci of a religion — specifically those things that we hold to not exist in fact. If a group 'believes' in less particular or empirically problematic things like love or the tragic dimensions of life, we tend to refer to these not as beliefs, but as cultural values, attitudes, or dispositions. If a group hold convictions about astrological destiny, we are very willing to describe such attitudes as beliefs, not as culture.

Belief is our characterization of the specific illusions of others. But the distinction between belief
and culture is not dramatically demarcated: belief is also our shorthand for the epitome of what we see as being encultured, culture-bound, or culturally determined.

We explain a culturally particular belief, and that is a very redundant phrase, by its place in a structured system of ideas that we assemble. In this way we see what the belief 'means.' Since the objects of the beliefs do not actually exist in our view, there is no other route for meaning; so the meaningfulness of beliefs is dependent upon rendering them coherent within a system of ideas. Coherent systems of belief create a meaningful structure, namely 'religion,' which makes sense to us of the particular and the illusionary. This can be a very circular way to work.

In connection with this tendency to identify belief with extremes of cultural particularism and determinism, we also talk about belief as a type of deeply-held mental orientation or conviction. That is, belief is described as one type of thing, an all-or-nothing, on-or-off state. There is little evidence to warrant such a view outside of certain specific confessional practices. Both formulations of belief, as the illusion rendered meaningful when made part of a larger coherent system understood as religion and as a state of deeply-held convictions, emerge in Shweder's argument that the interpretation of beliefs is the central anthropological question — and its fault-line. He evokes the 'witch' question that lies at the root of anthropology, namely, if your informant tells you, perhaps at some risk of negative consequences, that she or he is actually a witch, what can you make of this statement when your own reality makes clear there are no witches? Generally, we must reconstruct the system of ideas that rationalize and render such statements coherent if we are to “interpret” them. This is an true advance, of course, on the earlier view that such statements are proof of some sort of “primitive mentality." Yet it is hard to be convinced that an interpretation in which a belief, taken as a designated illusion that is nonetheless a ‘type’ of truth, that is, as having its own particular reality, is all that different from interpretations based on a primitive mentality. Neither do I think anything is solved by concluding, as Shweder does, that unquestionably the informant is a witch.

A third problematic assumption, which I have addressed at length elsewhere, is the ease with which we grant belief a prior existence in order to cast it as the a priori shaper and instigator of action. While belief may well work this way some of the time, we have no evidence that this happens most of the time. Such an assumption, however, does allow us to 'explain' action by connecting it to its motivating beliefs, and from there to a larger reconstructed system, understood to be 'the' relevant system by its coherence and ability to explain the particulars with which the interpreter started.

Coherence

It is relatively recent thing for scholars to emphasize meaningful and systemic coherence in relation to what religion is all about. Only in the second half of the 20th century, for the most part, has the provision of coherence been seen as the defining role of religion, that is, what we theorists think it should do when religion clearly can no longer explain the nature of the universe or act as the authoritative source of morality. And this is not just the stance of theorists. When I quiz my students, completely unread in the relevant anthropological literature, meaningful coherence is what they also have absorbed as the expected role and real contribution of religion. They lament that they have not found it or a sufficiently steady experience of it. They are particularly aware of, and appalled by, what they see as the rampant incoherence — the fragmentation, hypocrisy, or compromises — in the lives of adults around them. For these students, as for most scholars of religion, religion should have a holistic coherence that delivers meaningful experiences. Yet even those who have devoted their lives to religion — the clergy of many different persuasions — rarely find those qualities in their religious experience if you ask them. Coherence can be found only in some explicit self-presentations by persons, texts, or institutions. We can argue for the existence of a 'deeper' coherence, of course, either in the organization of the brain, the personal psyche, the social structure, or the dynamics of culture —
all universalizations that support the major theories and disciplines of the 20th century. Awkward
to use today, but still regularly invoked, these approaches contrast with attempts to see beliefs
and believing as a matter of specific sets of actions or situations, that is, approaching believing as
a type of social practice rather than a (true or false) linguistic statement or mental conviction.

To indulge an autobiographical example, I originally thought to study religion because I
was interested in how most people—that is, folks not schooled in the language and history of
philosophy—made sense of their lives and worlds. I have not been heavily invested in any
particular formulation of this focus, just in the general human project implied, which has to
include how readily people get by without giving much attention to making any larger sense of
things. It was clear to me growing up among the natives of Long Island in the 1950s and 60s—
indeed, it was a striking feature of the religious attitudes there—just how little coherence
religion actually seemed to provide or was even expected to provide. Later, in the 1970s,
coherence became a more explicitly stated expectation, but as before, religiosity within the
spectrum of conventional lifestyles seemed to hinge on internalizing a complex array of
departmentalizations and disassociations.

On Long Island, and in other places I have come to know well, what is thought of as
religion by the natives is more matter of loosely packaged sets of behaviors—what we can also
call "bundles of behaviors" or "habits of action." For Long Islanders, these packaged sets of
distinct behaviors were used to deal with such events as death, serious illness, perverse
misfortune, and occasionally life-crisis like birth, marriage or divorce, as
well as, naturally, the ritual life of defined communities gathered at the church, synagogue, house
meeting, prayer circle, or meditation group. In actual fact, family, jobs, and personal projects of
service to others were more obvious over-arching systems of meaning; religion appeared to be
invoked simply to support them. Long Islanders' delineation and expectations of religion are not
the same as other places that could be described. Yet neither are these other places so different
that we cannot articulate similarities and differences. The commonality that allows for such
articulations is the 'principle of charity' defined by Davidson, a particularly felicitous if
provocative basis for any new take on interpretation.

The Chinese "Believe"

In even the most sophisticated literature on Chinese religion and culture, it is readily
stated that the Chinese believe in spirits. Some Chinese will say something like that too, as I
learned at a shamanic exorcism down the block from where I lived in Taipei. After the bloody
shaman was through with his spectral combat, and everyone was relaxing, the apartment owner
complained that she had heard there were no ghosts in America, which seemed so unfair since
large numbers of them kept bothering people in Taiwan. Analogously, there is the eloquent essay
by the early 20th century sociologist, Fei Xiaotong, entitled "The World Without Ghosts," where
he recounts growing up surrounded by ghosts who were as real to him as his many relatives.
Fei used the ghost theme to set up a thoughtful contrast between Chinese and American cultures.
As beliefs go, believing in spirits is not a particularly strange example, and we are very
accustomed to the holistic construction known as Chinese religion, which can make such beliefs
coherent among themselves and understandable as a type of meaningful truth.

Yet if the Chinese 'believe' in spirits in anything like the way my Long Island community
believed in papal authority, or even the way Christian colleagues believe in a central doctrine like
the divinity of Jesus Christ, then the statement that the Chinese believe in ancestral spirits is, at
best, a very vague generalization that ignores everything interesting. It ignores the great
differences from one person to another, awareness of the possibility of other positions, the
individualized inner juggling and tensions, as well as pragmatic non-judgments and refusals to
engage. Most language about belief, and about Chinese religion in general, leaves little room for
these features and certainly does not begin to account for them.
There are, as you would imagine, many Chinese positions on spirits. Just a sampling of the most famous and familiar ones can demonstrate the complexity of believing, at least in regard to this one topic in Chinese history. In the fifth century BCE, for example, the sage Mo Tzu argued that the degeneration of civilization since the sage-kings was due to only one thing, doubt about the existence of ghosts and spirits. Those who say "of course there are no spirits," he argued, bewilder the people and bring disorder to the empire. In fact, he continued, people can know that spirits exist in exactly the same way that they know anything exists - through reliable testimony, the consensus of textual sources that have proven their authority in other matters, and personal experience by the senses. Several centuries later, the Han dynasty writer, Wang Ch'ung, made the opposite argument in order to refute Taoist teachings. With what has been characterized by later readers as admirable rationalism, Wang argued that "man is a creature. His rank may be ever so high ..., but his nature does not differ from other creatures. There is no creature who does not die" and soon become dust. Hence, for Wang Ch'ung, there can be no ghosts, spirits, or gods. In the medieval period, Han Yu (768-824 CE) admonished the emperor for his public attentions to the "bone of the Buddha" in an essay that became well-known among the literate. More widespread were the ubiquitous tales of the supernatural, such as those collected by Hung Mai in the 12th century, which all turned on the moment when someone who did not believe in spirits personally experienced their intervention and came to realize the truth of their existence.

Any village or urban neighborhood in China, Taiwan or Hong Kong also yields a wide spectrum of positions on spirits. What is important about the variety, I think, is the evidence that individuals are very aware of the number of possible opinions and thus have located their own position -- if it is clear enough to be called that -- as a matter of some choice and deliberation. These people know that others hold different ideas, that many reject the whole thing, that people may act contradictorily, or some feign belief for self-serving reasons. There is little to suggest that a belief in spirits comes with the culture or is any one sort of belief. There is, in other words, very little systematic coherence.

As interpreters of texts and cultures, scholars of religion know that a Chinese text preaching filiality to one's ancestral spirits cannot be taken as descriptive of the actual state of cultural affairs in China, any more than a Long Island sermon about loving the poor can be taken as descriptive of Catholic life as it is really lived there. It is much more accurate, and certainly more interesting, to read admonishments and affirmations as argumentative practices, perhaps involving some complex sharing of ideals, but not as representations of a static or coherent situation.

If we argue that a person's options are still culturally limited in the forms and degrees of belief possible, clearly the limit is much further out or more blurred than we usually acknowledge. Of course, Chinese culture is extremely diverse and even by the medieval period it had seen a great deal of cultural trafficking. Perhaps this plurality influenced the boundaries of what could be thought in the culture, let alone what constituted belief and its systemic coherence. A possible counter-example dealing with a relatively more isolated society is suggested by Renato Rosaldo's account of headhunting among the Ilongot. He implies little or no debate, doubt, or discussion among the Ilongot about the efficacy, and meaningfulness, of headhunting; but he does note discussions of its necessity and periods when young men did not take heads prior to marriage. If there is no evidence of various shades of conviction and degrees of involvement in headhunting practices, then that would seem to be an unusual situation warranting study as such.

Religion

All native statements about belief can be seen as concerned with the nature (classifying and boundaries) of religion in the sense that people on Long Island and in Beijing are constantly asking themselves what to believe, how much to believe it, and with what specific investments or
commitments. This is true not just for so-called religious ideas, of course, but also for personal affairs or economic and political matters. People regularly ask questions that deal with what we might call the cultural boundaries and definition of religion. There are some familiar examples, such as the famous Rites Controversy provoked by the Jesuïts in 17th century China, which revolved around the question whether ancestor worship was religion as such and had to be abandoned by converts, or whether it was an aspect of customary etiquette and no more threatening to converts than the bow given in greeting. Of course, this was a more critical question for the foreign missionaries than for most, though not all, Chinese. A careful ethnography by Margery Wolf details the extended deliberations in a small village in Taiwan over the question of whether a particular woman was a shaman-to-be called by the spirits or an batty and unsympathetic outsider to be shunned. Drawing on more recent examples, members of the recently outlawed group, the Falundafa (Falungong), to some extent like other qigong societies in China since the 1960s, have had to decide to what extent their practices are religious or simply therapeutic physical exercises that do not threaten other religious affiliations or fall under government control of religion. For various political reasons and agendas, their deliberations and articulated positions are carefully calibrated to keep the line between religion and therapeutic exercise more unclear than clear.

When a coherently organized systemization of beliefs is proposed by a Chinese source, then a very specific argument is being made about the way things really are. The creation of a broadly designed system of coherence is a particular rhetorical project, one undertaken indigenously as well as by outside scholars. And the difference between the practices of these two groups is, perhaps, one of the many distinctions that should lose its importance in our analyses. For example, coherence is an important part of the argument made by a subset of Chinese texts known as morality books (shanshu), which emerged in 12th century China among the opportunities of easy wood-block printing, inexpensive paper, and manageable distribution; they are still produced and circulated today. These texts are explicitly engaged in an enormous polemical effort to provide a totally comprehensive and coherent understanding of the workings of the world, both visible and invisible, in terms of universal and inexorable laws of cosmic retribution—despite evidence available to all that appears to contradict such a system. In this project, these morality books reinterpret a wide variety of local and regional practices in terms of a system said to underlie the otherwise incoherent or incomplete cosmologies attributed to Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism and folk religion. As such, this project often echoes scholarly studies that present a coherent overview, at least more coherent than the last scholarly attempt, of a definable cultural tradition, although such overviews can be found particularly unhelpful come a real encounter with some aspect of the said tradition.

As a type of test of the hypothesis I am proposing, one can look again at a well-known example of an underlying and apparently determinative cultural structure, namely, Arthur Wolf's ethnographic account of the different grades of spirit currency burned to ghosts, ancestors, and gods—coarse yellow paper, paper with a silver appliqué, and finer paper with a gold appliqué, respectively. Although focusing on one part of Taiwanese rural society, Wolf argued that this system of paper types demonstrates a more basic and wider cultural understanding of the organization of the cosmos, one "that mirrors the social landscape of its adherents." His ethnography is often cited as evidence of a latent structure in Chinese folk practice, in reference to which a particular belief, such as the existence of ancestral spirits, makes sense to people and accounts for a variety of related actions. However, it is equally persuasive, and correct, to argue that Wolf represented this practice as more coherent and routine than it really was or is. Extended ethnographic observation adds so many qualifications and regional differences that the original assertion can be regarded, at best, as heavily generalized, that is, as much suggestive than descriptive.
Several sociological studies have attempted to assess the degree of coherence among the beliefs to which people are willing to attest, and their results reinforce each other: there is surprisingly little coherence among people’s formulated beliefs and it decreases as one moves from more educated and articulate people, comfortable with narrative or abstract categories, to the less-educated, who are not as apt to use them. 41 Two of these studies also inquired into the “meaning” of various ritual practices and found little consensus among the explanations given, even when people were asked about ritual features that had well-known, even memorized, doctrinal explanations associated with them. Instead of these formalized and accessible explanations of belief, which informants could volunteer when pressed, people routinely preferred to use their own, fairly personal 'takes,' which used very loosely related ideas and claimed to be rooted in experience.

My own research into ritual activity makes me tend to think of beliefs not as something prior to or separate from action, that is, not as something mental, cognitive, or linguistic in opposition to the physical or active. If there are habits of the body, there can be habits of thought and expression as well as speech and self-presentation. They are all social activities. While I use terms like 'religion' – albeit with all the historical qualifications and hesitations shared by others - - when talking about Chinese materials, the language of belief seems more distorting, in particular, by specifically imposing a false sense of coherence, conviction, systemization, and meaning. We cannot appeal to 'belief' to describe how people exist within their cultures; yet without 'belief,' it is not clear what we mean by 'religion.' If it seems easier to talk about Chinese religion, rather than Chinese beliefs, it may be simply because one is more comfortable today attributing a working coherence among cultural phenomena rather than implying the illusion and falsity of specific ideas.

This problem brings up an interesting association, namely, the strange fortunes of what would seem to be a particularly Chinese “bundle of behaviors,” the prognostications of fengshui (wind and water), which are ubiquitous in California and becoming familiar elsewhere in the United States. Going beyond the dabbling of "new-agers" or the concerns of transplanted Chinese, fengshui is also being used by all sorts of serious people as a type of back-up system of cosmic control and insurance. It is possible that one day, we may compare its global spread to such other cultural practices as food spicing and tea drinking. A similar phenomenon can be seen in the enduring popularity of the Asian martial arts, especially taiqi, begun in the late 1970s and early 80s, or Japanese Zen meditation, begun in the 1930s. Fengshui, taiqi and zazen are closely tied to ritual postures considered very basic to Chinese and Japanese culture, yet they have been readily translated to the more pluralist sections of American society. The viable translatability and subsequent longevity of these sets of practices indicate the existence of something not readily caught in either universals or particulars, something both more durable and mutable and much less hindered by incoherence with other sets of practice.

In short, such packaged sets of behaviors blur 'religion' as such. As a feature of a global society and culture, the translatability of fengshui, taiqi and zazen is evidence of cultural properties going in many directions – perhaps too many for our notions of religion and culture to track. In the end, religion may vanish as any sort of empirical entity in one place, only to emerge in another, as attested by the growing numbers of Christian evangelicals in Beijing as well as the government officials trying to control them with a stretched classification schema. To appreciate these issues is to be more fully historical in our understanding and use of theoretical categories.

Fengshui is not particularly illuminated by being regarded as a belief or part of a more comprehensive religion, terms that return to the defining polarities of universalism and particularism. Nor do the activities of members of the Falundafa fit traditional theories of religion, although they do evoke many older models in Chinese history. Theorists do not need to stop using the terms belief and religion, but their historical freight must be made part of them. And theorists do not need to stop theorizing, of course – after all, it is a distinct cultural practice.
to seek universal explanations and doing so must be as legitimate as offering incense to one's ancestors -- as long as no one gets hurt. But the coherence or incoherence of practices can be explored on a more realistic footing if scholarship can let go of the transcendent status still clutched by Shweder and the quest for a logically prior theory of interpretation still sought by Davidson. Without the panorama provided by these perspectives, we will have to spend a lot time figuring out how to situate ourselves, but the alternatives do not seem to take us very far either.
ENDNOTES


3 This point is made by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. in "Belief." In Mark C. Taylor, ed., *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000), pp. 21-35.


"What is the criterion of reliability, dependability? Suppose you give a general description as to when you say a proposition has a reasonable weight of probability. When you call it reasonable, is this only to say that for it you have such and such evidence, and for other you haven’t?"

"For instance, we don't trust the account given of an event by a drunk man."


7 Davidson, p. 144.

8 In a section relevant to analyzing some forms of religious beliefs, Davidson suggests that an indeterminacy of meaning or translation should not be seen as a failure to capture important distinctions, but rather that these distinctions themselves are not that significant. In other words, indeterminacy can be important. See Davidson, p. 154.


Among those who have addressed this topic, let me simply note Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1993); and Jonathan Z. Smith, "Religion, Religions, Religious."

One has only to recall the popularity and fecundity of Jorge Luis Borges’ fanciful description of a Chinese encyclopedia, which was identified as Chinese to locate such wonderfully exotic and still totally alien difference. I will only note here Michel Foucault’s use of the image in *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1973), p.xv. One of the stronger arguments against the Western terminology of religion for understanding Chinese religion is given in Jordan Paper’s *The Spirits are Drunk: Comparative Approaches to Chinese Religion* (Albany: SUNY 1995), especially pp. 2-12, even though Paper argues that the comparative study of religion is still viable.

In his 1980 study, *Ilongot Headhunting 1883-1944: A Study in Society and History* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 1980), Renato Rosaldo’s recognition of the problems with anthropological analysis led him to abandon many anthropological concepts and adopt an extremely biographical, even autobiographical approach.

Shweder, “Post-Nietzschian Anthropology,” pp. 109-10. It is interesting to note the difference between the interpretive tasks represented by Shweder’s witch claim, on the one hand, and Davidson’s examples (pace Taski?), on the other, in which he ponders the interpretive process involved in understanding Kurt’s statement, *es regnet*, and Karl’s statement, *es schneit* (Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth*, pp. 129 and 141, etc.).


Important influences on the interpretive importance of coherence have been Peter L. Berger’s arguments about the construction of a nomos as a meaningful order (*The Sacred Canopy: Elements of A Sociology of Religion* [New York: Doubleday, 1967], p. 19; and Clifford Geertz’s arguments about religions as a system (“Religion as a Cultural System” in Michael Banton, ed., *Anthropological Approaches to the Study of Religion* [London: Tavistock, 1966], reprinted in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* [New York: Basic Books, 1973], pp. 87-125; and a bit more distant, Claude Levi-Strauss’s structuralism (e.g., *The Savage Mind* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1966])).

It is interesting that theorists talk about coherence as something projected, while believers and would-be believers almost always talk of it as something found. For another discussion of coherence, also see Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner, “Clifford Geertz’s Long-Lasting Moods, Motivations, and Metaphysical Conceptions,” *Journal of Religion* (1999): 617-640, especially p. 626.

My evidence here is simply personal conversation with clergy primarily, though not exclusively, in the Christian, Jewish and Buddhist traditions.

Needham suggests this direction, belief as social action, although he does not develop it; anthropology has done a better job at grasping this stance than religious studies, although they have done so at the cost of the relativism for which anthropology is so often accused.

Davidson expands W. V. Quine’s use of this idea, see Inquiries into Truth, p. 136, note 16.


For a provocative engagement of related issues, see Maurice E. F. Bloch, How We Think They Think: Anthropological Approaches to Cognition, Memory, and Literacy (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1998).

Mo Tzu, "On Ghosts" in Victor Mair, ed., The Columbia Anthology of Traditional Chinese Literature (New York: Columbia University, 1994), pp. 31-39. These are, of course, exactly the reasons that I 'believe' in nuclear physics, space travel, many medical treatments, or the usefulness of 'talking things out' in a marriage -- to name just a few common examples.


Rosaldo tried to explore the practice without the usual judgments of the time by attempting to see the rationality of headhunting and by looking to find aspects of his own experience illuminated by his encounter with Ilongot culture. See his Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis (Boston: Beacon Press, 1989; 1993). In Ilongot Headhunting 1883-1974, particularly pp. 55, Rosaldo describes the Ilongot concept of history and Ilongot unwillingness to accept the veracity of stories of the past, as well as the lack of any uniformity to their accounts. "In general," Rosaldo writes, "Ilongots are unlikely to accept as true any narrative about events they neither saw for themselves nor heard about from an eyewitness" (p. 55). Of course, in this passage Rosaldo is assessing attitudes toward stories and explanations, not toward activities that are considered (by whom?) central to the culture, like headhunting. In terms of comparative ethics, one approach to all the other problems of cultural comparison and objectivity, Rosaldo has addressed the 'ethics' of Ilongot headhunting. In “Of Headhunters and Soldiers: Separating Cultural and Ethical Relativism,” Santa Clara Magazine 42, no. 2 (Fall 2000):18-21, Rosaldo argues that the acceptance of cultural differences, even extreme ones, does not lead to an acceptance of the chaos of ethical relativism.


For an example of what this might look like as analysis, see Susan Friend Harding’s The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics (Princeton: Princeton University, 2000).


It is impossible to be nonchalant about the fact that the topic of belief has been addressed at this university for about as long as universities as such have existed. As home base for centuries of theologians, philosophers, linguists, and anthropologists, who have constantly redefined the so-called "problem of belief," one is automatically humbled, if not crushed, by the weight of the history of all these opinions. Is there anything left to be said? Of course. Knowledge is not a glass one can fill up or a wall that is built, brick by brick, generation by generation, to be judged someday as sufficient, if not complete. Knowledge is a constant exercise of interpretation in which all the components – the interpreter, the interpreted, and the contextual reasons to bother in the first place – are always shifting. So, pinned, perhaps, but not crushed by the weight of history, let me give belief yet another try.

Belief is identified in different ways by philosophers, anthropologists, and cultural theorists, but it has become something of a habit to refer to the issue as "the problem." Even across the full spread of academic disciplines, there are scholars who will identify belief as the problem of their respective fields. In the time I have with you today, I would like to explore the problem status that belief
for the formal study of religion in particular. I wish in doing so I could expose the
vacuous triviality or sententious cynicism of the current research trajectories, and
then map a brilliant route through the problem. But I can only work to make an
argument for a line of thinking that may allow us to ask some fresh and pertinent
questions; it will not solve all the problems identified with belief and certainly
would not satisfy any of my predecessors in the preceding centuries of lectures on
this topic. In an area like this one, an additional perspective cannot improve on the
work of others in any absolute sense; but it may have the virtue of supplying more
effective words for the questions of this generation or a more effective approach to
work with such questions in a clearer fashion.

It should be noted at the outset that few terms in any discipline spread
themselves across the lexicon of the European languages as broadly as belief. Its
uses are legion. One uses the term in reference to the God of biblical qualities and
one’s confidence in a particular television weathercast. That old master of the
English language, W. C. Fields, captured the crux of the dilemma when he
classically pronounced that “Everyone should believe in something. I
believe I’ll have another drink.” Fields aside, the relevant literature stretches from
David Hume to Donald Davidson and from Wilfred Cantwell Smith to Slavoj
Žižek. One is informed by the work of Paul Connerton and Danielle Hervieu-
Léger on memory; Pierre Bourdieu and Michel de Certeau on practice; Rodney
Needham on the significant anthropological issues; Paul Veyne and Donald Lopez have been historical and theoretical touchstones. And the theological tradition is indispensable, of course, from Tertullian to Tillich, Irenaeus to Rahner. Belief is clearly an issue in human reasoning and communication, cognition and memory, psychological orientation and social conditioning, religious reflection, and analyses of secularism. I want to cobble together a rather simple direction using my ideas about their ideas primarily to foster a long overdue discussion in my own field, the history of religions, spurring it with an exploration of the value of the term as an analytic tool in the study of religion.

I. Surveying “The Problem”

The popular press is very ready to see particular problems posed by belief and believers. Several years ago I could note studies on the silliness of religious beliefs, such as Wendy Kaminer’s Sleeping with Terrestrials: the Rise of Irrationalism and the Perils of Piety and Michael Shermer’s Why People Believe Weird Things. Since then, reactions to the terrorism of 9/11 in America have come into print, examining not just extreme Islamists, but the religious radicalism seen in American politics. Most recently, Sam Harris has won much attention for his stinging critique of all forms of religious belief in The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and Future of Reason. However, such strong reactions are also due to the
decision by the state of Kansas school board to introduce “intelligent design” along side evolution in the state’s science curriculum. Although their decision was successfully challenged in court, and half of the school board was subsequently voted out of office, the specter of religion creeping into science classes is providing much grist for the mills of indignant scholars. It would be hard to be more iconoclastic than the book by the distinguished philosopher of science, Daniel Dennett. In *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, he compares religion to a virus that can thrive in the body of a receptive host, whose subsequent (irrational) behavior enables the propagation of the virus species.

These opinions constitute the latest chapter in Western culture’s perpetual polarization of belief and reason, faith and rationality, religion and science. These issues were articulated most clearly, of course, in the social reorganizations and formal documents of the Enlightenment, where the poles of this dialectic were set. Yet we are still seeing our culture in terms of faith versus reason even though we clearly live in a very post-Enlightenment world. Indeed, the Enlightenment paradigm now encodes a wide variety of ideological if not material interests, specifically, in America, biblical religion versus Darwinian science. Scientists, theologians, hack writers all contribute to the fray that politicians have been very willing to exploit. All start from the same stark duality in which science is the natural opposite of religion, each pole constantly alert to contain the power wielded
by the other. Only a savvy journalist or two has suggested the degree to which this simplistic view of religion and science is a play of shadow puppets manipulated by a variety of interest groups on the political playing field. In the end, the paradigm of reason versus belief is deeply ingrained in the discourse of modern culture even though it is not a very good depiction of the conditions of modern culture.  

In the discourse community of philosophy, quite beyond the machinations of the popular marketplace of ideas, the qualities of belief are not opposed to reason and simplified Enlightenment dichotomies have been left behind, although not forgotten. The views of thinkers from Hume to Wittgenstein could be surveyed at this point to illustrate a lively philosophical tradition, continued by such late 20th century figures as Stuart Hampshire, Gilbert Harman, and Richard Rorty; with Rorty one also evokes the lineage of American pragmatism from William James through John Dewey. In an earlier publication I focused on the American philosopher Donald Davidson, at some length, to understand better the “problem of belief” as it figures in current philosophical analyses. In striking contrast to the popular perspective, philosophy generally thinks of belief as a universal quality, playing an integral role in a basic holism (not a division) interlacing thought and action in general. Davidson’s “principle of charity,” a name appreciated especially by the novice, argues that broad agreement is the condition for any linguistic understanding of each other. Asserting that “belief is central to all kinds of
thought," he explains that belief is what allows us to take for granted general perceptions of the material world that are basic to the formation of thoughts, spoken statements, and the conditions needed to understand each other. Belief and meaningfulness are dependent on each other, and have a formal role in the act of interpretation.

To give a more specific example, Davidson argues that we have to believe that the statements someone makes are or can be true, even if we conclude he or she is lying, mistaken, or crazy. Thus we must infer belief to grant the meaning needed to make the most basic act of interpreting each other. This is probably enough Davidson to illustrate the contrast he presents to the popular view opposing belief with the meaningfulness of reason; instead of making belief the weak half of this type of dualism, a philosopher like Davidson locates the problem of belief in the universal act of person-to-person interpretation.

In the set of closely intertwined disciplines -- anthropology/sociology, cognitive theory, and the study of religion -- the problem of belief is conceived in quite distinct ways, but in each case the fundamental issue concerns the degree of holism that is understood as basic to social understanding. Still, these fields would not use Davidson’s terminology, so comparing their views of belief is rather difficult. But for most scholars of culture, belief is the problem of universalism versus particularism: that is, what can we assume to be common to all people
simply by virtue of our common roots in evolution, history, or even the human condition, and what is culturally particular to a social practice even while subject to forces of diffusion that can push certain activities well beyond an original point of germination. However, universality can sometimes mean common to all social life and sometimes simply “mentally accessibility to all.” In the latter case, because one may be familiar with belief in the God of the Abrahamic religions, one may feel – rightly or wrongly – that one has some access to how ancient Greeks believed in their pantheon of gods.

Particularism suggests that we have no such access to the experiences of another religion and, indeed, can only make sense of what is so foreign by attempting to reconstruct, only more or less accurately, a system of ideas in which specific pieces can be illuminated. By the time any universal or particularist project is underway, it is probably rife with assumptions and precarious leaps of logic. Yet, at the same time, it is easy to see a measure of common sense to both positions – that we can understand something about other human experiences and we should not assume that we can understand anything about them.

Few have tried as hard as the anthropologist Richard Shweder to find a reasonable synthesis to the opposition of universalism and particularism. In a series of studies in the 1980s he tried to clarify all the different versions of the arguments on both sides, and then he attempted to elucidate a self-consciously post-positivist,
postmodernist position. Shweder argued that the discipline of anthropology was the product of a collision between our notions of universality and particularity. This collision created a "fault-line," he argued, using the metaphor of continental plates, which can be illustrated by various vexing scenarios that come up routinely for the anthropologist. Indeed, Shweder suggests, were anyone able to resolve such scenarios, anthropology as we know it would probably not be needed any more; the whole field would collapse. A typical scenario is the "witch question," which is actually not so removed from the possible experience within a multi-cultural society. According to Shweder, the witch scenario unfolds when your informant, the person whose judgment you have so greatly relied upon, takes you aside one day and admits, possibly at some degree of danger to himself, that he is really a witch. You come from a tradition that does not believe in witches, so do you accept this statement by your informant as true or not true? 

With the argument that the interpretation of beliefs is the central anthropological question and the distinctive fault-line of the discipline, Shweder's answer is two-fold: unquestionably, the person is a witch (in this way Shweder recognizes the culturally relative and particular), but as the anthropologist who must reconstruct the system of ideas that "makes sense" of this belief, he can claim a type of "transcendence" of the particular and the relative (thereby recognizing a capacity to perceive the universal in some form). Shweder hastens to add that this
sense of transcendence must not be accompanied by any sense of superiority, since one culture is simply using its categories to interpret another -- and the same operation is no doubt being performed by the informant. Shweder wants to establish a position of relative “transcendence without superiority” with regard to the “realities” that another culture presents to one’s own cultural categories. I think that Shweder has, in fact, described one of the ways we negotiate the fault-line; he does not describe how to resolve it. Anthropology may be safe for another day.

The respected anthropologist Katherine Ewing provides a curious postscript to Shweder’s fault-line “witch” question. Ewing’s works on Sufism, particularly the highly secret relationship between disciple and Sufi master, and she contributed a remarkable account of personal experience in the journal, American Anthropologist. Subtitled “The Temptation to Believe,” Ewing used her own experiences with a Sufi master, who seemed to be directing her dreams, to articulate a common experience among anthropologists thoroughly embedded in a culture, the drift into a generally vague but sporadically more explicit form of belief in the ideas they are studying, often derided as “going native.” Ewing describes how the circumstances of her dreams left her wobbling in her confidence as an objective ethnographer. To an extent not clear to herself, she became a type a believer and, therefore, an insider--someone who understood and was told more.
Yet going native can leave one unable to explain any of this insider information to one’s professional community by virtue of vows of confidence, or simply the inability to convey the convincing insider experience.20

In contrast to the fine parsing of the problem of belief in anthropology, the term presents few concerns for cognitive theory, a field that is currently the locus of much excited debate by scholars of all types. Composed of psychologists, neurologists, evolutionary biologists and all the subfields in between, cognitive theory gives a great deal of attention to why and how people believe. One recent title is explicit — “Why Would Anyone Believe in God?”21 The most common “short” answer identifies believing as a cognitive process selected for its adaptive value in the evolutionary task of human beings surviving in stable groups. This makes believing part of what created thinking, sociable humans, although some cognitive theorists are quick to point out that it is a vestige of evolution that ill equips us for modern life.

Despite a focus on etiology of belief, cognitive theory is a bit quick to define it as the religious act of positing the existence of what they call “counter-intuitive agencies.”22 So, while philosophers regard religious believing as just one instance of the larger cognitive phenomenon of belief, so far that is the main interest to cognitive theory. Most cognitivists are unabashedly scientific, intent on
“explaining” (eklaren, not verstehen) why irrational beliefs, or religion, came into existence and remained long past its most obvious adaptive uses.\(^{23}\)

For those in the fields of neurology, the neurophysiology of cognition, or evolutionary biology, their interest in religion is tied to new research tools like magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) as well as the synergy of these new fields coming together around new maps of the mind and paradigms of consciousness and neural processing.\(^{24}\) Their apparent lack of hermeneutical interest in the challenges posed by language is in keeping with the style of science generally, but it makes their work feel very alien to humanists. When they locate “the problem of belief, they solve it, that is, they explain what is going on. Even when their explanations can only be speculative, they sound very reductionist to scholars concerned to interpret (verstehen) rather than explain (eklaren).\(^{25}\)

However, the late anthropologist, Roy Rappaport, used cognitive theory, among other things, to develop a speculative account but insightful and popular analysis of the nature of belief. He assumed its biological evolution and focused on the dynamics of its social enactment, through which an experience and concept of “the sacred” was generated among human beings and functioned, in turn, to mold them as human beings. This social process involved, as Vico, Comte, and Hume all suggested, an experience of power and an act of submission to the idea of a higher authority. Rappaport playfully describes the concept of power in this way: “The
unfalsifiable supported by the undeniable yields the unquestionable, which transforms the dubious, the arbitrary, and the conventional into the correct, the necessary, and the natural.” The process of deferring the quality and significance unquestionableness to the unknown comes to constitute sanctity itself; it is as a form of absolute authority that the sacred makes possible “the foundation upon which the human way of life stands.” For Rappaport, belief in sanctity enables humanity to evolve social community, intellectual reflexivity, and the experience of transcendence itself.  

The idea that religion may be a selected adaptive feature in human evolution is far from new; it goes back to many pre-Darwinian notions of social evolution. In mid-twentieth century phenomenological theories of religion, an approach based on religion as *sui generis* or non-reducible to other forces, scholars such as Mircea Eliade would even speculate about evolutionary origins before confining discussion to the “phenomenon” at hand, the origins of which should not matter.  

The phenomenology of religion approach, otherwise known as the history of religions, has been significantly derelict, compared to its disciplinary neighbors, in discussing belief. Perhaps the need to distinguish itself from theology explains the odd lacuna in their decades of analysis. Yet it is surprising that belief, as a separate entry, was left out of the multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Eliade and published in 1986. Instead, the reader is told to “See Doubt (and Belief),”
which provides a thoughtful but very theological engagement of the topic. Belief may have been ceded to the theologians in order to help define the borders of the phenomenological study of religion. With an exception here and here, my colleagues in the history of religions -- compared to philosophers, anthropologists and cognitive theorists -- have not seen a “problem” with belief. In fact, they do not seem to see belief at all, although they refer to it all the time. 

II. Universal and Particular

The preceding discussion has been a brief scurry through some background for the problem of belief. Let me now focus on one of the most central issues and illustrate it with materials more germane to historical studies – and that is, the universality or particularity of our references to belief. In other words, can we say that all people believe in religious entities? Can we describe all religious ideas as beliefs? Or does “believing” imply a very specific type of self-conscious relationship with specific types of divine entities? The ethnographic evidence is mixed. In 1972 Rodney Needham noted the expedient ease with which many ethnographers blithely claimed that such and such people believe in this and that god or gods, comfortable with the assumption that the English verb “to believe” captures the particular religious sensibilities of a very different people. Of course, as the Shweder discussion made clear, a universal assumption about the know-
ability of other peoples and cultures has been basic to anthropology. Similarly, a fundamental assumption about the unity of believing as a phenomenon has supported the whole enterprise of comparative religions and most “world religions” textbooks.

In contrast to those who found belief everywhere, Needham pointed out the close attention to local terms first used by Evans-Pritchard in his study of the Nuer and their theology. Needham himself examined the indigenous terms for anything comparable to belief among the Navaho, Hinduism, the dialects of the Philippines, and the Penan of Borneo. The exercise gave evidence, he suggested, of “the bewildering variety of senses attaching to words ... indifferently translated by the English ‘believe’.”

Most recently, the Buddhologist Donald Lopez analyzed the term belief for its usefulness in the study of religion, challenging the assumption of universality. For Lopez, our notion of belief as something common to all religions is part of our blindness to difference and willingness to convert the world to one way of thinking. He argues that what we intend by belief has a clear historical locus in the matrix of meanings forged by early Christianity and developed in the course of Christian history as it sought to define its theological orthodoxy and institutional jurisdiction. It was during the Inquisition, in fact, that belief acquired its current distinctive gloss by which outward action is deemed an inadequate indication of
the views one harbors deep within the heart. Only torture can reveal those sentiments and elicit true repentance, if needed.

Lopez illustrates his point with the dramatic narrative of Peter of Verona, a 13th century preacher asked by Pope Gregory IX to launch an Inquisition against the Gnostic heresy of the Cathars or Albigensians. This early Inquisition institutionalized testing a person for one’s true beliefs, while defining the errors and punishments associated with the sin of heresy against the church. But Lopez notes that the Inquisition was also deeply involved in the confiscation of property, which added to the local zeal of the movement, and in a struggle for political control of a great deal of southern France between the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. Peter of Verona, early Inquisitor, eventually became a martyr to the cause: the story has it that as he was dying from a stab wound, he inscribed “credo,” the beginning of the orthodox creed, on the ground with his own blood.

The credo, of course, points back to the long historical importance of oral and public assertion of one’s beliefs, although all the creeds of the early church arose in the context of disputing heresies. However, summing up a great deal of history in this one brief historical sketch of Peter the Inquisitor and martyr, Lopez concludes that Christianity came to distinguish belief not by what a person said publicly, but by “the invisible content of the mind.” Since the means for identifying believers from non-believers would give great power to the one
deciding who had what in their hearts, Lopez also concludes that the idea of belief "is neither natural nor universal. It might be described as an ideology, an idea that arises from a specific set of material interests."  34

Lopez develops a second example describing the 1881 Buddhist Catechism with which Colonel Henry Steele Olcott sought to bring Singhalese Buddhism into the modern world. In Olcott’s understanding, Buddhism was a religion and, therefore, a system of beliefs. So he was shocked by how poorly the pious monks of Sri Lanka could recite back to him the basic beliefs that early translations had made so familiar to Olcott. He was especially concerned that Buddhists be able to hold off the growing influence of Christian missionaries who were destroying the indigenous culture. Pointing to Olcott’s "ideology of belief," Lopez suggests that his assumptions about the universal nature of religion were rooted in Christian history and doomed to obfuscate real understanding of Buddhism.  35

Although Lopez’s argument for the cultural particularism of belief is welcome for taking up the topic of belief at all, I cannot fully agree with his conclusions. Still, in a publication of my own not long after his, I indirectly supported a similar position by challenging the frequently quoted formula that “the Chinese believe in spirits.” In fact, the closer one tried to pin down such a generalization, the more complicated became the ideas of “the Chinese” as well as “believe in spirits.”  36
III Choice

My arguments supplemented those that Lopez invoked when he countered the assumed "universality" of belief by pointing to the cultural particularity of the concept's origins. But Lopez was convinced that the concept of belief originated in the matrix of Christianity and that its onslaught obfuscated the real dynamics of local Singhalese Buddhism. I would question Lopez's analysis in these two areas.

First, does the concept of belief that we have today, which went out to conquer the world in the 1st century and, he suggests, again in the 16th, really originate in Christianity? Paul Veyne's study of belief among the ancient Greeks complicates the picture, as does a new study of the legacy of Pythagoras and several studies of 1st century BC/AD Judaism.37 38 The more we learn about how the Christian matrix of belief fits into the full historical mosaic of social forces at the time of its supposed creation, the less originality we can automatically ascribe to that very successful religion. In other words, I am not convinced it's so Christian.

Second, although Lopez focuses on just this one encounter of Olcott and turn of the century Singhalese Buddhism, he knows better than I that the British were far from the first Europeans in Sir Lanka, that the Europeans were not the first to conquer and colonize the island, and that the island had been swept by the winds of other cultural influences for several millennia. It is also well accepted that the Sri
Lankans had the right to appropriate colonial categories, such as the idea of beliefs one learns by heart, in whatever way they wished. And they did. In fact, great parts of the world today increasingly understand themselves in terms of religious movements involving what Lopez describes as the Christian ideas of choice, conversion, and commitment that make up the Western notion of belief. If the three fastest growing religions are Catholicism, Islam and Christian evangelicalism, then belief is not a category we can dismiss for its checkered ideological past in the hands of papal Inquisitors or colonial catechists. It has meaning to many today.

Two short studies by de Certeau are provocative for rethinking the issue of belief. He suggests, perhaps unwittingly, that most modern European languages allow sufficient looseness to the idea of belief to justify the very general sense in which we might interpret the term, that is, as the understanding that more often than not human beings think of themselves as coexisting in the cosmos with other invisible beings, usually sacred or superhuman, and this coexistence involves certain interactions with them. De Certeau himself assumes universality in his analysis of how believing sets up a temporally defined contractual relationship, marked by the investment of one party with the clear sense of something eventually due in return. Yet he is a sociologist of modern industrial society, suggesting that today we can never really understand belief. It is a wary modern
conclusion, based on the popular view, he suggests, that for us now there are “too many things to believe and not enough credibility to go around.”

De Certeau actually dips in and out of two understandings of belief, ones that would be familiar to Needham. In one line of analysis he cleverly describes belief as what we have when we no longer believe. Yet in pointing to this “fallen” state, de Certeau assumes a disruptive change in some automatic cultural moment, a change that came with degrees of choice about what to believe or how much to believe it. When the cultural status quo is rocked by change, then “beliefs” are apt to be formulated or clarified. They may even be compared, the new with the old, if only to attempt to dismiss the influence of a visiting anthropologist or missionary. In this discussion de Certeau seems to imply the existence of an innocent, pre-choice, unself-conscious mode of transaction with the gods, who are not formulated in concepts any more than they need to be. Stories, titles, distinctive ritual greetings or offerings – these are the ways such innocents believe; certainly not in reasoned concepts. Only when the missionaries arrive, the Phoenicians land, the Jews conquer Canaan, or cultures clash, are presented with choices, which, as a break from the old, must be accompanied by an extra show of commitment. Then we are no longer dealing with the gods; we are dealing just with our beliefs.

IV. Rejection
In contrast to Lopez and de Certeau, Paul Veyne does not make arguments about the universal and the particular; he talk about “modalities” of belief and the effect of choices. He describes one modality as coming into being when the option of doubt opens up a new type of choice, the unprecedented social position of being in a position to doubt. Veyne describes Pausanius, laboring over his compilation of the stories of local gods, deciding that a “kernel of truth” must reside in the many redundant tales he had amassed. Before him, of course, Herodotus reported what many different people told him with the amused distance of one not closely attached to a particular version. And Thucydides researched the stories he was told, to create one clear narrative of the Peloponnesian war that, being the most reliable version he could determine, he believed in. These are not the triumph of logos over mythos, Veyne suggests, but the development of mythos, and history, and criticism—all modalities of belief, co-existing modalities of truth.

Several elements come together in Veyne’s account that will not be easily undone in Western culture (creating a limit to what can co-exist). First, the cultural pluralism seen in the plethora of local tales that Pausanius gathers, the social shaded perspectives compared by Thucydides, the culturally varied material reported by Herodotus. Secondly, the process of comparison and choice: due to the pluralism that he stumbled upon, Pausanius chose to assume a so-called “historical kernel” of truth in all the myths, while entertaining a new type of doubt about the
details, especially the repetitive mythic themes. It is a familiar modality of both believing and doubting. Thucydides took the other extreme, to leave out the fantastic altogether in favor of a distinctly non-mythic realism demonstrated by the internal logic of the narration itself. In this choice, *mythos* is defined as the incredible and doubtful, irrelevant to the type of critical history in which Thucydides now believed.

By the time Christianity developed in the long simmering melting pot of the Mediterranean world, if you got around a bit beyond your own village, your beliefs would identify and locate you; if you got around a lot more, they were apt to involve some personal choices, whether it was Mithraism, attachment to a particular Roman god, convictions about the Christ in any of the various versions of his significance, or involvement in some sect of Jewish nationalism. When personal choice entered the picture, believing was always seen as a type of conversion away from the rule of reason, which would never be more than the rule of the familiar, the status quo, simple common sense; exercising choice was an acceptance of the incredible, remaking your old identity by the choosing as well as by what was chosen. A set of beliefs to which one orally testified became the crux of being Christian, or a follower of Mithra, a devotee of Jupiter, and so on.

Textual culture -- seen in the different enterprises of Pausanius, the Essenes, or the letter-writing Christian Paul -- could make its own claims as a medium, that
is, develop its own modalities of belief and doubt. The gathering together of a
canonical set of scriptures, the way so many Christianities were weeded out of the early Church and history, established some of its authority by the attributions to attributed to people who had been there as witnesses. While this made the texts a great source of authority for the revelation of Christ, oral and public recitation of the credo made one a Christian.\(^{44}\) Continuing to work Veyne’s generous term, further modalities of belief would open up between scriptural testimony, on the one hand, and the institutionalization of apostolic succession claiming authority over them, on the other. This early distinction would to ripen into the great divide of the 16\(^{th}\) century Reformation.

Lopez might be analyzed historically a bit further. In which case, early Christianity pulled together many influences to imbue the practices of believing with its own particular set of meanings. As with every winner on the historical stage, Christianity developed to define the parameters of believing for so much subsequent European history, although other local models always existed, if with difficulty. Within the Christian matrix, belief was premised on individual choice and, as such, could always vie with the traditions of tribe, city, or family. It was a matter of choice, conversion, commitment, with doubt of the other firming up into rejection of all else, at times even repulsion. This process was ritualized early on in the institution of the catechumenate. At the same time, the succession of creeds
articulated by the early churches continued to ritualize entrance into the rightful “house” through the oral profession of the doctrines of one’s faith.

Lopez mentions the feature of rejection in passing; and I think he is very right to note this aspect of the Christian model. Its modality of choice clearly meant a concomitant rejection: I believe in this, not that; I am a Christian, not a Roman, not a Jew. Choice does not require rejection, but it became the final component for the emergent Christianity that cast and recast itself in those early centuries. Indeed, after so much time modern Christians have had to learn how commitment and rejection can relax into choice and mere doubt, otherwise real tolerance would be inconceivable.

V. Believing

Yet Lopez’s analysis raises some questions.

First, is Christianity really the model of believing in the many of cultures of Europe as well as its colonial legatees? Has the model remained fixed in nuance and emphasis? And, can a certain historical set of Christian assumptions indelibly shape our sense of the term in all the European languages for all time? Christians certainly fit the traditions of the Jews, Muslims and various pagans into their own model, and what did not fit could not be easily thought. Lopez is undoubtedly correct in his characterization of the substance of that model for some of medieval
history, but since the Enlightenment, and probably the Renaissance, that model has been tweaked and refitted and subject to interpretation. As a small example, I have known Catholic institutions for a good part of my life, in one connection or another, and I know that up close 20th century Roman Catholic believing has changed dramatically in a mere half century in most places in Europe and America. I think the question of historical homogeneity impacts how we view the probable origins of the model.45 Were the really Christian?

Second, an easy contrast to the religious matrix of choice, conversion, commitment and rejection would be the religious cultures of the primarily oral peoples Europeans encountered. Yet the assumption that such peoples were all sufficiently isolated to afforded no real socio-cultural choices to individuals until the Christian missionary arrived is probably overstated and in danger of propagating, under the table, so to speak, more of a Christian-centered understanding of history. As an assumption, this theoretical isolation and lack of choice among indigenous peoples is probably very dependent on a Protestant tendency to misunderstand orality itself as inherently primitive; this view made it very difficult for the earliest ethnographers to even refer to indigenous spiritualities as "religions" – and when they could, the implied continuity across cultures implied was not appreciated by European religious, and academic, authorities. We are increasingly learning that indigenous cultures in the past were rarely so isolated
or marked by consensus that the individual had no choices to make, such as trading further afar, joining the cults that would arise at times of stress, absorbing more quickly the influence of conquering tribes whose enlarged kingdoms would evolve more complex religious patterns, or simply the decision to assume a larger role in the ceremonial life of the community -- like the blinded hunter, Ogotemmeli, who was the keeper of the Dogon sacred lore imparted to Marcel Griaule. No matter how small and isolated, everyone in a community would not be involved with their spirits and cultural lore to the same degree or in the same way. This is not to deny that some communities appear to engage in whole-sale rejections of outside influences, such as the missionaries, in favor of their own traditions. But I do question the uniqueness of the “choice and conversion of the individual” model.

These are not technical quibbles aimed at Lopez’s argument; I think they are inherently challenges to the degree of “particularity” to which we think we can resort when jettisoning master narratives and grand universalities. If the Christian model of belief described by Lopez really has older roots and many varietals, and oral cultures do not prevent the presence of some of the components of this so-called Christian model, then an even more central – methodological -- question looms. Is the historical freight of the notion of belief in the European world so set and insurmountable that the term has not or cannot evolve to be used – with care and imagination -- to describe other ways of believing? To say it cannot could
suggest that other cultures do not believe in anything like the sense of the term. Do we really want to be so particular that we are thrown back on another form of ethnocentrism?

I do not think that stretching our term belief to attempt to describe very differently constructed relationships with the supernatural is demanded by the hermeneutics of suspicion that drives a good post-modernist historian. Neither can I imagine any usage that would allow us to cease examining the baggage the term might still carry or take on. 48

I am suggesting that, contra Lopez’s anti-universalism (understood more as colonialism), we might want to press our basic terminology beyond its usual culture-reinforcing channels, avoiding universalism as well as excessive particularism. We would so do to have a basic analytical tool with which to explore real similarities as well as real differences, thereby allowing us to revise our tools even further to create ones more capable of multi-cultural purposes. Although the methodological channels for pursuing this approach are not obvious, I think the language of practice theory provides some basic guidelines. With a practice approach, we would ask about believing, not belief or beliefs. First of all, we could not assume that there is any one way of believing. Then we would ask how believing is constructed in the “semantic system” of particular cultural settings: what inner logic distinguishes it in Dogon or Buddhist cultures from other forms of
thinking, philosophizing, etc. To explore how believing is constructed would involve laying out the semantic field in which it is locally distinguished -- to whatever extent it may actually be distinguished. This is more complicated than simply determining what is believed and the forms believing takes. In addition, a practice approach would not let us assume that believing is a purely internal state of any kind, nor a personal understanding of ritualized relationships with divine powers.

Practice theory is based on a “critical” methodology, which first demands that we deconstruct the issue to determine exactly why we are interested in it, why it is a problem to be explored or explained. In other words, we must uncover the implicit expectations, the assumptions at stake, the crown jewels in the pocket of a particular view of reality, that is, the value that is endangered if some assumption of our reality is unveiled. Practice theory also expects critical analysis to include an explicit rationale for the usefulness of the rethought term or issue. To analyze modes of believing, therefore, should not yield the same analysis as ritualizing or textualizing, to use some topics I have addressed before with practice theory; nor should it yield the same descriptions as 19th century theories of animism, monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, etc.

De Certeau’s work is the oldest and clearest ‘practice-like’ theory around, to date, but provocative resources lie in the ideas of Connerton and Hervieu-Léger on
memory (which attempt to shake up our premises and explore other cultural issues that may be involved in believing), and in some cognitive theories of the socially adaptive value of agency.

I cannot lay out for you today a "practice theory of believing" - much as I wish my work were at that stage. I am confined to a "gadfly" role for today. I do want to suggest, however, that exploration of believing among Greeks and Romans would have to begin as an historical analysis of a non-essentialized lineage of people, groups, stories, texts, and rites both public and private over varying amounts of time and place. Such a study could arguably isolate some particular cultural strategies at work in the different ways Greeks, and Romans, believed -- what I would call a strategic way of acting that enabled a certain type of meshing of constructed expectations, understood cosmology, and reinforcing personal experience, a meshing that would accomplish personalized socio-cultural ends, however political or even aesthetic they might be, however incomplete in any particular instance. I suggest that, for starters, choice, commitment, and rejection is not at all what Christian believing it about. That is what Christians like to think they are doing, and while not irrelevant by any means, it is only half the story. Most likely, believing most generally is likely to involve the ways in which contradictions are maintained, not truths affirmed.49

Thank you.
Endnotes

1 This talk is drawn from a book manuscript in progress, parts of which have been given as lectures and also published: Bell, History and Theory, Dec 2006 forthcoming; Bell, “The Chinese Believe in Spirits: Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion,” in Nancy K. Frankenberry, ed., Radical Interpretation in Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002) 100-116. No part of this manuscript can be cited or reproduced without the permission of the author.

2 Gauri Viswanathan, Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief (PUP, 1998), pp. xiii-xvii.

3 W. C. Fields

4 David Hume; Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); W. C. Smith, Belief and History (Charlottesville, NC: University of Virginia, 1977); Slavoj Žižek, On Belief (London: Routledge, 2001).


7 Sam Harris, End of Faith (New York: Norton and Co., 2004). The science writer for the New York Times wrote “The End of Faith’ articulates the dangers and absurdities of organized religion so fiercely and so fearlessly that I felt relieved as I read it, vindicated, almost personal understood.” Posted on www.samharris.org, but originally published in the NYT.


9 Daniel C. Dennett, Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon (New York: Viking, 2006).

10 There is a rough fairness, however, in the balance of book marketing, when one compares the critical publications of experts or quasi-experts with the enormous popularity of the extensive world of religious publishing. Truly phenomenal sales have been registered by the Christian paperback series, Left Behind, about what happens when “the Rapture” actually occurs and the saved people are suddenly taken, bodily, to Heaven - - taken from the pilot’s seat of an airborne jetliner among other dramatic examples. For all the huffing and puffing about irrational religion, this series has made millions for the authors and widely popularized evangelical teachings about the coming apocalypse. [Left Behind, Tom LeHaye and ...]

11 See Bruno Latour here ...

In a more recent and distinctly new current within the field, the anthropologist Matthew Engelke reminds us that the path breaking anthropologists of the twentieth century, E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner, who both spent years in the field participating in the elaborate ritual life of the Nuer and the Ndembu, respectively, each converted to Catholicism after a few restless years back in the halls of academe. Perhaps after years of close involvement in the highly structured ritual lives of these communities, and then the relative sterility of the rationalized modern technocratic state, Catholicism presented the closest answer to a ritual life with a similarly embracing complexity. (Matthew Engelke, The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on ‘the inner life’” Anthropology Today 18, no. 6 [December 2002]: 3-8) Engelke also wonders if the attempt to understand one religion can leave one in a better position to understand another; in this case, Evans-Pritchard’s and Turner’s understanding of the African religions they documented so well might have given them insight and empathy for a religion closer to home. Engelke seems to be innocently raising anew an issue that, in a version only slightly different, marked the birth pains of the degree-granting discipline of the non-theological study of religion, namely, does one have to be a member of a religion to truly understand it. As just stated, the question implies that outsiders engaged in the formal, secular study of religion could not really understand Catholicism or Nuer or any other religion. Today it is easily granted that such a scholar would understand the religion differently, indeed, be engaged in answering very different questions than those of concern to practicing members of the religious community. Through the 1960s, however, this issue involved a lengthy and occasionally contentious process of differentiation as the study of religion carved out a place for itself alongside the other disciplines devoted to religion – theology, scripture, and ministerial studies, among others. (See J Z Smith article [in his folder] and in Relating Religion?)


In another depiction of the fault-line, Susan Harding, an anthropologist, has called the intellectual community to account for its demonization of so-called “fundamentalist” Christians (or conservative evangelicals, as they call themselves), which deliberately created the distance that was then bemoaned by social science. According to Harding, she would remain locked out of their worldview and locked in her own prejudices unless she could let down her professional-personal defenses and accept these believers on their own terms. [See Engelke for Harding, also The Book of Jerry Falwell…] Robert Orsi, a scholar of American folk religion, author of several remarkable studies of immigrant Catholicism, facing similar issues, describes negotiating a major ethical challenge encountered when he went to study the famous snake handlers of Tennessee. [Orsi, Heaven and Hell …] Theirs was a whole culture and he was admitted to it, but did taking them on their own terms mean suspending his previous, and still active, ethical norms? The problem of belief has been at the heart of where different cultures meet with each other with interest while clashing in values, where they meet with a sense of shared humanity only to diverge in shock when particular beliefs contest particular beliefs.

Justin Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God?

Barrett, Boyer …

See Boyer, for example…

These paradigms are …

While some of these theorists are not blind to the dilemmas of social science, and even those of the humanities, they can be unusual “cross-over” figures. Noteworthy is this regard: Scott Atran, In Gods We Trust, and Justin Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God? More challenging, the work of Stephen P. Turner, Brains/Practices/Relativism and Ilkka Pyysiäinen, Magic, Miracles and Religion.


Compare Pyysiäinen’s comments on phenomenology and his turn to science in Magic, Miracles, and Religion, pp. xiii-xvi, which have a “born-again” style that does not inspire confidence. But confidence in the value of the phenomenological sui generis approach to religion has now fallen by the wayside as questions of origins are once again considered relevant to the project of interpretation.

29 Important exceptions are W. C. Smith, Donald Lopez (to be discussed), and …

30 Needham, Belief, Language and Experience.

31 Needham, Belief, Language and Experience, pp. 32-37, 37.


33 Lopez, p. 28.

34 Lopez, p. 28.

35 Lopez, We can supplement Lopez’s argument with the well known history that the church inherited, among so much else, the dialectical poles of both Greek rationalism and Hebraic revealed monotheism. Tertullian’s cutting inquiry, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” would be echoed less and less in early Christian history as Greek apologias, such as that of Irenaeus, were joined by the Hebraic view of revelation contained in the creeds, which defined orthodoxy just as they diagnosed heresy. After centuries when Greek culture was more or less lost to Europe, it revived (via Islamic scholarship) bringing back something of the same early debate: for Thomas Aquinas it meant what weight to accord revelation and reason in coming to know God. His answer, which inscribed reason into the heart of the Latin church, was the scholastic theology (and cosmology) lasting in the Roman Catholic Church until the mid-20th century, affirm the power of reason and revelation. But the 16th century, already influenced by the Renaissance, the affirmation of dependence on faith alone, although it ultimately introduced the modern sciences located in study of the book. Yet reason and revelation were both individual apprehensions of the mind and heart; no matter in what the proportion given to each, Christian belief was not an act, not a work, but a state of the mind, with ramifications for the individual soul, not to be fully known by anyone, beyond a confessor, until the Day of Judgment. (unmodified, see notes)

36 Bell, in Frankenberry, ed., Radical Interpretation, pp. 100-116. Chinese historical literature contains a variety of explicit positions on spirits, although the famous anti-spirit arguments are also admissions of the popularity of the pro-spirit view. But a corresponding discomfort attends the sheer enormity of a generalization like “the Chinese,” a particularly homogeneous group outside the early semi-mythical ancestry of the Han people. At least one classic ethnographic study, based just on Taiwan but generalizing to broad conclusions about the unity of Chinese popular religion has been cited as authoritative for three decades. Now, wider fieldwork can, unfortunately, deflate the author’s neat claims. If it seems that when regional practices are seriously analyzed, the variety is so great that there is no obvious coherency whereby the cosmos reflects social categories, or vice versa. The supposed unity of “the Chinese” at the dynamic level of folk culture is not something that can be assumed. More subtle issues are captured in a lovely essay by the early 20th century sociologist, Fei Xiaotung, entitled “A World without Ghosts.” Fei Xiaotung describes growing up in a large house with closed-off wings, all said to be populated by an endless number of ancestral ghosts. He shivered and shook at times, but in retrospect it was a closely populated world that made home a large and interesting community of which he felt a part. Fei compares such a boyhood to the American model of growing up under the influence of comic books about an endless stream of superheroes. How these two mindsets could not result in very different people and cultures, he asks; but for all the confidence in facing the future instilled in the American child, Fei concludes he would not trade his floating spectral family and quieter, subsumed individuality. Now, to what extent can we assume that Fei, writing as a sociologist so many years removed from boyhood, believes in spirits? The essay form, the simple but insightful comparison, his tender nostalgia – they all suggest that his beliefs were culturally automatic and unquestioned at one time, but the worldly professional is not the boy; he became quite self-conscious and distant in regard to believing it all. Do the Chinese believe in spirits only when they are young? When they are older, some may but others do not? Still my first example demonstrated that to say “the Chinese believe …” about anything can be an entertaining but hardly scholarly generalization.

37 Christine Joost-Gaugier, Measuring Heaven: Pythagoras and His Influence on Thought and Art in Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Ithaca: Cornell, 2006)

de Certeau, “What Do We Do When We Believe”

de Certeau 177-179

d e Certeau

It is easy to recognize that people who have never been exposed to any world view but that of their own isolated culture probably do not generally hold the sense of coexistence in the world with their deities that one can find in a worldly savant like Augustine of Hippo, who was aware of many ways of looking at a more or less meaningful universe. Indeed, the first type of society offers its people limited options, nothing more than greater or lesser involvement in the various cultic activities that are not mandated, as initiations or ancestral rites might be. The more cosmopolitan society provides many more and dramatic distinct options, such as those faced by Augustine, who, according to his not totally reliable Confessions, saw two worlds, two cosmologies, fundamentally opposed to each other, demanding that he choose. In fact he had chosen many times, but the demand for a choice never left his purview. He would make a melodramatic choice to believe something specific, to turn from the cultural tradition of Terence and Virgil, to the biblical Christ of the North African Christianity of his day. His was a choice to engage in a new and specific set of relationships with the divine that brought a set of responsibilities accompanied generated by a very human community to which he was now tied. Mick McCarthy paper.

Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Chicago, 19 ), foreskin account.

Eisenstein’s detailed explanation of the rise and ramifications of printing in Europe chronicles its association with the growth of a monastic industry advertising relics. Pilgrimage grew as people read, or heard from those who did, about these marvels and their purported cures, giving rise to the hospices run by the monasteries to house the wayfaring pilgrim and the wealthy cathedrals that grew up at the end off their routes. The relics and the hospices that went with them were important sources of income, not only enabling a monastery to build itself a great cathedral but also to undertake the copying of manuscripts, an activity so important for the life-blood of Christian culture and even the reappearance of Greek. So the printing of simple advertising circulars depicting the relics and miracles to be had at any particular place was among the immediate uses for the new technology. Yet, Eisenstein contains the account of one vexed male pilgrim, complaining, after having gone to visit a seventh reliquary displaying the foreskin of Jesus. Like Pausanius, he was struck by doubt. But rather than grant a kernel of truth, or hope, to any one of them, he seems to have ditched his previous piety to sarcastically question the whole business. Eisenstein’s example describes the circulation of people around Europe and the holy land, the circulation of texts that encouraged them and then described their experiences, presenting them with a variety of competing holy items, even competing notions of holiness. Perhaps not many were as disposed to cynicism as the writer of the complaint about a few too many foreskins; they may simply have refused to select, continuing to put their hope in one relic after another. But surely economic limits and the ability of some displays and stories to exert their influence would make choices inevitable—and some monasteries died while others prospered into major centers. In any case, plural options, or choices, could induce the faithful to accept much in the name of believing or reject it all for more critical stances. The diversity that Greek and Roman culture presented, especially the alternatives presented to Jews or Christians should they travel through Rome or beyond, forced choices on people at every turn. CHECK

Christianity itself was never so homogenous that it could represent a unified modality or matrix, without variations in every possible component. The Christian matrix lived within the religion as well, as the Inquisition itself too clearly reminds us. Lopez’s presentation of the role of the Inquisition in defining the nature of belief represents a very historically defined moment in church history and one that sounds like a conceptual prelude to the Reformation. In the early Christian communities, we know that the nature of belief as well as the exact focus of belief were very much up for debate. What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem, asked Tertullian; Origen took up the same question roughly a century later. But a century after Origen, he was a declared heretic as the church came to define more clearly its place in a Greco-Roman empire, even if it
fought off all Gnostic rationalizations of the particular divine-human revelation that Jesus Christ was thought to represent. The matrix is assembled slowly, and as it did, more corners and centers of Christendom experienced fewer choices or conversions, the rejections mere pro forma condemnations of distant heretics and pagans.

47 Bell in Frankenberry, ed., Radical Interpretation.

48 In Lopez’s quickly drawn example, late 19th century Sinhalese Buddhism acts as a type of polar opposite to Christianity. In this sketch, Theravada Buddhism is not built around beliefs, and certainly not the confessional, doctrinal or theological exploration of them; it is a practice, entirely moral at first, intent on distinct forms of physical and mental self-restraint at the more demanding level of the monk, with the explicit goals of a better rebirth and eventual transcendence (to use a Western term). Of course, the first Buddhists were probably converts of a sort; they chose commitment to a different path, perhaps not rejecting others so much as prioritizing the options, and maybe the differences were minor. But choice is exercised repeatedly in the stories of Buddhism. As you may know, the questions “do Buddhists believe?” evokes the very old, and tired, question once endemic to comparative and world religion enterprises as to whether Buddhism could properly be called a religion or not. This tempest in a teapot hails from the days when Buddhist practice was less defining of the tradition to Westerners than Buddhist scriptural teachings; clearly, Buddhism violated most of the definitional “norms” that religions believe in a transcendent being or benign force corresponding to a type of eternal soul. Ninian Smart, among others, was convinced that if we let Buddhism in to the ‘religion’ category, and he did (it certainly meant textbooks sold better), then why not communism, that other great example of a soul-less ideology qua religion. So his cold war textbooks, and a few others, usually did include some discussion of communism and treated Buddhism as a religion with odd parameters – until it got to Mahayana of course.

To suggest an answer would be to suggest what is distinctive about the modality of believing that the Greeks evinced toward their gods: before too much critical analysis had piled up as a cultural option and all the stories were gathered to be revered as myths. Whatever it was earlier and later, it was different from believing among the Romans, whose mythic narrative was standardized earlier on and remained a bit separate from many activities of cultic worship. The “problem of belief” may be something different in every disciplinary field, given their particular histories of research and research materials. But for the study of religion, the problem of belief is clearly a meaningless dead end. What can we ever say about belief in general? We can talk about beliefs, which are many, all had or held in different ways. Like any discipline, including Shweder’s fault-lined anthropology, we are concerned with the limits of what we know, the differences that we see and imagine, as well as the commonalities that we cannot help but assume. This means that religious studies must focus on the practice of believing, on how people believe, construct believing relationships... Through critical analysis we must leave the Christian baggage behind, which it can do only when we know it, as best we can at this point in history, but committed to continually plumbing the depths. Looking at the practice of believing, relativizing believing, emphasizing the activities rather than a hypothetical mindset, may enable us to do this. While is it another paper to lay out a full analysis of what it means to focus on the practice of believing, I think the simple change in wording opens the imagination to allow new and different questions. It may not take us as far as we need to go; we may still find ourselves caught, like an oversize fish, in yet another fine netting of cultural assumptions. But for the post-colonial anti-Christian dilemma that Lopez would leave us in, or de Certeau’s romantic having it both ways, or Veyne’s generative classicism of myth to analysis, but all truths – these do not allow us to go further a field, they beach us on dry land. They confine us to an impossibility, or a Christian ideology defined to seize goods and land; or a naïve mythic truth compared to the critical truth, all the gift of the Greeks. Yes, the Greeks became self-conscious about their gods, but so did the Romans while being as bound to them as to the city and their history and their fortunes; but a far traveled people, there was always an odd element of doubt. The special qualities of believing for the Greeks and the Romans -- that is something this seminar will be addressing. I simply hope to have sketched out enough to indicate the main issues behind
the well trodden paths and the reasons to look to another route where the adventuresome will find different questions to ask...
I prepared the bulk of this paper for a group of Oxford-Princeton classicists, who are offering an annual seminar, the topic this time being the issue of faith (or belief) in the ancient world. In ten pages I am leaving out, I take them on a very quick tour of the "problem of belief" as it have been defined in several key disciplines in the humanities and social sciences -- notably philosophy, anthropology, cognitive theory, and my own field, the history of religions. That is the first section. I want to pick up here, with some adaptations for a Buddhalogical audience, with the specific issue so important to the study of religion, namely, the universality or particularity of what we mean by belief.

In other words, can we say that all people believe in religious entities? Can we describe all religious ideas as beliefs, or might "believing" imply a very specific type of conscious or unconscious relationship to particular entities? The ethnographic evidence for going in all these directions is mixed. In 1972 Rodney Needham noted the expedient ease with which many ethnographers blithely claimed that such and such people believe in this and that god or gods, comfortable with the assumption that the English verb "to believe" captured the particular religious sensibilities of a very different culture. Of course, a universal assumption about the know-ability of other peoples and their cultures has been basic to anthropology. Similarly, a fundamental assumption about the unity of
believing as a phenomenon has supported the whole enterprise of comparative
religions and most "world religions" textbooks. But it may also be responsible for
much of what is unsatisfactory with such projects as well.

In contrast to those who found belief everywhere, Needham pointed out the
close attention to local terms first seen in Evans-Pritchard’s study of the Nuer and
their theology. Needham himself examined the indigenous terms for anything
roughly comparable to belief in Navaho religion, Hinduism, the dialects of the
Philippines, and the religious ideas of the Penan of Borneo. The exercise gave
evidence of “the bewildering variety of senses attaching to words … indifferently
translated by the English ‘believe’."30

Most recently, the Buddhologist Donald Lopez launched a very targeted
attack on the assumption of universality in our notion of belief. He argues that the
term has a clear historical locus in the matrix of meanings forged by early
Christianity and developed in the course of Christian history as the Church sought
to define theological orthodoxy and institutional jurisdiction.31 It was in the
Inquisition, Lopez suggests that belief acquired its current distinctive gloss, namely,
that outward action is an inadequate indication of the views one harbors deep
within the heart. Only torture, if needed, can reveal those sentiments and elicit true
repentance.

Lopez uses a dramatic narrative, the story of Peter of Verona, a 13th century
preacher, who was asked by Pope Gregory IX to launch an Inquisition against the
Gnostic heresy of the Cathars (or Albigensians). It was the Inquisition, Lopez notes, that institutionalized testing a person’s true beliefs and defined the errors and punishments associated with the sin of heresy against the church. But the Inquisition was also deeply involved in the confiscation of property, which added to the local zeal of the movement, and in the struggle for political control of a great deal of southern France being waged between the pope and the Holy Roman Emperor. Peter of Verona was eventually deemed a martyr; his story has it that as he was dying from stab wounds, he inscribed the credo, the beginning of the orthodox creed, on the ground with his own blood. With a tad less evidence than one might want for a very complicated chapter in medieval history, the story of Peter and subsequent Inquisitions lets Lopez conclude that Christianity, in this period at least, distinguished belief not by what a person said, but by “the invisible content of the mind.” Since the means for identifying believers from non-believers gave great power to the one deciding who had what in their hearts, Lopez pushes this conclusion further: the idea of belief “is neither natural nor universal. It might be described as an ideology, an idea that arises from a specific set of material interests.”

Lopez gives a second example describing the 1881 Buddhist Catechism with which Colonel Henry Steele Olcott sought to bring Singhalese Buddhism into the modern world. In Olcott’s understanding, Buddhism was a religion and, therefore, a system of beliefs. So he was shocked by how poorly the pious monks of Sri
Lanka could recite back to him the basic beliefs that the translated textual sources had taught so well to Olcott. He was especially concerned that Buddhists be able to hold off the growing influence of Christian missionaries destroying the indigenous culture. Lopez argues that the “ideology of belief,” assumed by Olcott to be the universal nature of religion, was rooted in nothing more than the assumptions of Christian history.³⁴

Although Lopez’s argument for the cultural particularism of belief is a striking one, I cannot fully agree with his conclusion. Nonetheless, in a 2002 publication I presented data that indirectly supports a similar position. Arguing with the frequently quoted formula that “the Chinese believe in spirits,” I noted how reality got more complicated the closer one came to any particular situation.³⁵

Chinese historical literature contains a variety of explicit positions on spirits, although the famous anti-spirit arguments are also admissions of the popularity of the pro-spirit view. But a corresponding discomfort attends the sheer enormity of a generalization like “the Chinese,” a particularly heterogeneous group outside the early, semi-mythical ancestry of the Han people. At least one classic ethnographic study, based just in Taiwan but generalizing to broad conclusions about the unity of Chinese popular religion, has been cited as authoritative for three decades. Yet wider fieldwork can now, unfortunately, deflate the author’s long accepted claims.³⁶ It seems that when regional practices are seriously analyzed, the variety is so great that there is no obvious cultural coherence whereby the cosmos reflects
social categories, and vice versa. The supposed unity of "the Chinese" at the
dynamic level of folk culture is not something that can be assumed.

More subtle issues are captured in a lovely essay by the early 20th century
sociologist, Fei Xiaotung, entitled "A World without Ghosts." Fei Xiaotung
describes growing up in a large house with closed-off wings, all said to be
populated by an endless number of ancestral ghosts. He shivered and shook at
times, but in retrospect it was a closely populated world that made home a large
and interesting community of which he felt a part. Fei compares such a boyhood to
the American model of growing up under the influence of comic books about an
endless stream of superheroes. How could these two mindsets not result in very
different people and cultures, he asks; but for all the confidence in facing the future
instilled in the American child, Fei concludes he would not trade his floating
family and more subsumed individuality. Now, to what extent can we assume that
Fei, writing as a sociologist so many years removed from boyhood, believes in
spirits? The essay form, the simple but insightful comparison, his tender nostalgia
– they all suggest that his beliefs were culturally automatic and unquestioned at
one time, but the worldly professional is not the boy; he became quite self-
conscious and distant in regard to believing it all. Do the Chinese believe in spirits
only when they are young? When they are older, some may but others do not? All
told, to say "the Chinese believe ..." in any particular thing can be an entertaining
but hardly scholarly generalization.
III Choice

My arguments generally supported those of Lopez when he countered the assumed “universality” of belief by pointing to the cultural particularity of the concept’s origins. But the main issue for Lopez, convinced that belief originated in the matrix of Christianity, was the onslaught of a foreign and ideological category that obfuscated the real dynamics of local Singhalese Buddhism. Here, I think, Lopez’s analysis should be challenged in two ways.

First, does the concept of belief that we have today, which went out to conquer the world in the 1st century and again in the 16th, really originate in Christianity? Paul Veyne’s study of belief among the ancient Greeks complicates the picture, as does a new study of Pythagoras and his cult/legacy, and several studies of 1st century BC/AD Judaism. The more we learn about what Lopes called the Christian matrix of belief and how it fitted into the full historical mosaic of social forces at the time of its supposed creation, the less originality we can automatically ascribe to this very successful religion.

Second, in his monograph Lopez is historical only about this particular East-West colonial encounter. But we know he does not mean to imply that Singhalese culture was free of colonizing influences until Olcott arrived. The British were not the first Europeans in Sir Lanka, not by far; and Europeans were not the first to conquer and colonize the island. In other words, the island had been swept by the
winds of outside cultural influence for several millennia. Lopez would also agree that Sri Lankans had the creative right to appropriate certain colonial categories, such as the idea of beliefs that one knows by heart (note the phrase and what rote memorization has meant in our culture). In fact, the forces represented by Olcott were incredibly successful and great parts of the world today increasingly understand themselves in terms of religious movements involving choice, conversion, and commitment – all implicit in Lopez’s Western notion of belief. Now the three fastest growing religions are Catholicism, Islam and Christian evangelicalism, so belief is not a category we can dismiss for its checkered past in the hands of papal Inquisitors or colonial catechists. Explorations of the ways in which belief is now working in a mostly post-colonial world would undoubtedly be quite interesting.

[Story of UCLA Buddhologist; ordained in Yi Fo Sheng (Theravada)?]

In addition to Lopez’s chapter on belief, two short studies by Michel de Certeau are also very provocative for rethinking the issue of belief. De Certeau leaves me wondering if most modern European languages do not allow sufficient looseness to the idea of belief to justify the very general sense in which we might interpret the term -- as the understanding that more often than not human beings think of themselves as coexisting in the cosmos with other invisible beings, usually sacred or superhuman, and this coexistence involves certain interactions with them. De Certeau himself assumes a universality to belief in his analysis of how
believing sets up a temporally defined contractual relationship, marked by the investment of one party with the clear sense of something eventually due in return (perhaps a version of Mauss’s theory of the gift). Yet as a sociologist of modern industrial society, he also discusses how little we know, or can ever know, about belief. It is a wary modern conclusion, based on the popular view, he suggests, that for us now there are “too many things to believe and not enough credibility to go around.”

De Certeau actually seems to dip in and out of two understandings of belief, ones that would be familiar to Needham. In one line of analysis he cleverly describes “beliefs” as what we have left when we no longer believe. Yet in pointing to that “fallen,” post-indigenous state in which cultural options become available, de Certeau assumes a disruptive change in some automatic cultural moment, a change that comes by offering a degree of choice about what to believe or how much to believe it. Whenever the cultural status quo is rocked by such change, beliefs are apt to be formulated more clearly or fully. They may even be compared, new with old, if only to attempt to dismiss the influence of a visiting trader, anthropologist, or missionary. So, at times, de Certeau seems to imply the existence of an innocent, pre-modern, unself-conscious mode of transaction with the gods, who are not formulated in concepts any more than they need to be. Stories, titles, distinctive ritual greetings or offerings – these are the ways such innocents believe; not in reasoned concepts. Only when the missionaries arrive, the Phoenicians land, the Jews conquer Canaan, or cultures clash and are presented
with choices. These, to justify the break from the old, must be accompanied by an extra show of personal commitment. Then we are no longer dealing with the gods; we are dealing with our beliefs.44

IV. Rejection

In contrast to Lopez and de Certeau, Paul Veyne does not make any universal/particular-style arguments; he uses the more subtle, and obscure, language of “modalities” of belief. He clearly describes one modality that comes into being when the option of doubt opens up a new type of choice, along with the unprecedented social position of being one in a position to doubt. Veyne describes Pausanius, laboring over his compilation of the stories of local gods, deciding that a “kernel of truth” must reside in the many redundant tales he had amassed. Herodotus reported what many different people had told him with the amused distance of one not closely attached to a particular version – another modality of belief, write Veyne. Thucydides researched particular types of the stories and retold one clear narrative of the Peloponnesian war -- in his way, as the most reliable version he could determine. This is not the triumph of logos over mythos, Veyne suggests, but the development of mythos, history, and then criticism—*all* modalities of belief, modalities of truth.

Several elements come together in Veyne’s account that will not be easily undone in Western culture. First, cultural pluralism -- in the plethora of local tales
that Pausanius gathers, in the culturally wider answers to the curiosity of Herodotus, then in the different accounts compared and analyzed by Thucydides. Secondly, Veyne outlines a process of comparison and choice -- due to the pluralism that he stumbled upon, Pausanius chose to assume a so-called “historical kernel” of truth in all the myths, while entertaining a new type of doubt about the details, especially the repetitive mythic themes. It is a familiar modality of both believing and doubting. At the other extreme, Thucydides chose to leave out the fantastic altogether in favor of a distinctly non-mythic realism that demonstrates an internal logic within the narration, further defining *mythos* as the incredible and doubtful, irrelevant to the type of critical history in which he now believed and wrote – as another modality of belief.45

By the time Christianity developed in the long simmering melting pot of the Mediterranean world, if you got around a bit beyond your own village, your beliefs would identify and locate you; if you got around a lot more, they were apt to taken on as a personal choice, whether it was Mithraism, a particular Roman god, the new Christ in any of the various versions of his significance, or some sect of Jewish nationalism. When personal choice entered the picture, believing was always came to be seen as a conversion away from the rule of reason, which is, of course, simply the rule of the familiar, the status quo, common sense; such choices were an acceptance of the incredible, a remaking of one’s old identity by the choosing as well as by what was chosen. A set of beliefs to which one orally (and
ritually) testified became the crux of being Christian, or a follower of Mithra, a devotee of Jupiter, and so on. Textual culture, seen in the early efforts of Pausanius through Thucydides, could make its own claims as a medium of critical thought, that is, develop its own modalities of belief and doubt. The gathering together of a canonical set of scriptures, which was the way so many Christianities were weeded out, with the resulting texts attributed to people who were reputed witnesses, made the texts a source of authority for the central message--revelation of Christ. But oral and public recitation of the credo made one a Christian. To keep working Veyne’s generous term, further modalities of belief would open up between scriptural testimony and the institutionalization of apostolic succession that claimed the authority to guarantee them, and ripen into great divide of the 15th century Reformation.

It seems correct to me, just as Lopez has argued, that early Christianity pulled together many influences to imbue the activity of believing with a particular constellation of meanings. Like every winner on the historical stage, Christianity defined the parameters of believing for so much subsequent European history, although some other local models were able to hang on in places. Within the Christian modality, belief was built on individual choice and, as such, could always vie with the traditions of tribe, city, or family: choice, conversion, commitment, with ‘doubt of the other’ firming up into ‘rejection’ (even repulsion) of all else. Ritualized early on in the catechumenate, the succession of creeds articulated by
the early churches continued to ritualize entrance of individuals into the rightful house of Christ with the oral profession of faith.

Lopez mentions the feature of rejection in passing; but I think he is very right to note this feature of the Christian model. It's type of choice always meant a concomitant rejection: I believe in this, not that; I am a Christian, not a Roman, not a Jew, ideally, not master nor slave, male nor female. Being Christian was meant as the all-encompassing signifier. Indeed, after so many centuries of this style, modern Christians have had to learn how commitment and rejection can relax into personal choice (perhaps some doubt of others) merely in order for social tolerance to become conceivable.

V. Believing

Yet Lopez's analysis raises some questions.

First, is Christianity really the model of believing in the many of cultures of Europe as well its colonial legatees? Has the model remained an historically fixed matrix? And -- can a certain set of Christian assumptions indelibly shape our sense of the term in all the European languages for all time? Christians certainly fitted the traditions of the Jews, Muslims and various pagans into their own models, and what did not fit was so other it was hard to even see. Lopez is undoubtedly correct in his characterization of the substance of that model or modality at many points in our history, but how homogeneous must the model be over time to
include recent history and future trajectories, in all the main languages of study? For example, I have known Catholic institutions for a good part of my life, in one connection or another, and I know that up close Roman Catholic believing has changed dramatically in a mere half century in most places in America and Europe. This has been the subject of much analysis by Catholics and a few sociologists. I think the question of homogeneity does not only impact how we see the history of the West, and Christianity itself, it also impacts how we evaluate the probable origins of the modality.\textsuperscript{47} Were they really so Christian?

Second, an easy contrast to the religious matrix of choice, conversion, commitment and rejection would be the religious practices of the primarily oral cultures of the indigenous peoples Europeans encountered – as we even assume them to be today, of course. Yet the somewhat buried assumption that such peoples were all sufficiently isolated to afforded no real socio-cultural choices to individuals until the Christian missionary arrived is probably overstated and in danger of propagating, under the table, so to speak, more of a Christian-centered understanding of history. As an assumption, the theoretical isolation and lack of choice of indigenous peoples probably depends greatly on the Protestant misunderstanding of orality itself as inherently primitive, a view that made it very difficult for the earliest ethnographers to even refer to indigenous spiritualities as "religion" (the continuities across cultures implied by the term religion were not at first particularly appreciated by European religious and academic authorities). We
are learning that indigenous cultures in the past were rarely so isolated or marked by consensus that the individual had no choices to make, such as -- trading further afar, joining the cults that would arise particularly at times of stress that split larger communities into factions with different histories, absorbing more quickly the influence of conquering tribes whose enlarged kingdoms would evolve more complex religious patterns, or simply the personal choice to take a bigger role in the ceremonial life of the community -- like the blinded hunter, Ogotemmeli, who gradually revealed Dogon religious ideas to Marcel Griaule, who in turn amazed Europe with their sophistication. [Griaule's earliest books called these ideas African philosophy; it was only years later that the Dogon elders decided to tell him the real story].

No matter how small and isolated, everyone in a community would not be involved with their spirits and cultural lore to the same degree or in the same way. This is not to deny that, based on some very thorough ethnographies, some communities appear to engage in whole-sale community rejections of some outside influences, such as the missionaries, in favor of their own traditions. But I do challenge the uniqueness of the “choice and conversion of the individual” model.

These are not technical quibbles aimed just at Lopez; I think they inherently challenge the degree of “particularity” to which we think we can resort when jettisoning master narratives and grand universalities. If the Christian model of belief described by Lopez really has older roots and many varietals, and oral
cultures do not prevent the presence of some of the components of this so-called Christian model, then an even more central – methodological -- question looms. Is the historical freight of the notion of belief in the European world so set and insurmountable that the term cannot be used – with care and imagination -- to describe other ways of believing? To say it cannot could suggest that other cultures do not believe in any like the sense of the term. Do we really want to be so particular that we are thrown back on to another form of ethnocentrism?

I do not think that stretching our term belief to attempt to describe very differently constructed relationships with the supernatural – shared ritual relations ones or quite personal psychological ones – is demanded by the hermeneutics of suspicion that drives a good post-modernist historian. And it goes without saying that neither can I imagine any usage that would allow us to cease examining the baggage the term might still carry, or take on.

In Lopez’s quickly drawn example, late 19th century Sinhalese Buddhism acts as a type of polar opposite to Christianity. In this sketch, Theravada Buddhism is not built around beliefs, and certainly not the confessional, doctrinal or theological exploration of them; it is a practice, entirely moral at first, intent on distinct forms of physical and mental self-restraint at the more demanding level of the monk, with the explicit goals of a better rebirth and eventual transcendence (to use a Western term). Of course, the first Buddhists were probably converts of a sort; they chose commitment to a different path, perhaps not rejecting others so
much as prioritizing the options, and maybe the differences were minor. But choice
is exercised repeatedly in the stories of Buddhism.

As you may know, the questions "do Buddhists believe?" evokes the very
old, and tired, question once endemic to comparative and world religion enterprises
as to whether Buddhism could properly be called a religion or not. This tempest in
a teapot hails from the days when Buddhist practice was less defining of the
tradition to Westerners than Buddhist scriptural teachings; clearly, Buddhism
violated most of the definitional "norms" that religions believe in a transcendent
being or benign force corresponding to a type of eternal soul. Ninian Smart, among
others, was convinced that if we let Buddhism in to the 'religion' category, and he
did (it certainly meant textbooks sold better), then why not communism, that other
great example of a soul-less ideology qua religion. So his cold war textbooks, and
a few others, usually did include some discussion of communism and treated
Buddhism as a religion with odd parameters – until it got to Mahayana of course.

I am, of course, simply suggesting, contra Lopez, that we might want to
press our basic terminology beyond its usual culture-reinforcing channels, avoiding
universalism as well as excessive particularism, but giving us a tool with which to
explore real similarities as well as real difference among historical ways of being;
so doing helps to revise our categories even further into ones more capable of
multi-cultural purposes. Still, the methodological channels for pursuing this
approach are not obvious, though I think we have in the language of practice
theory so basic guidelines. Taking a practice approach, we would ask about believing, not belief or beliefs; we would ask how believing is constructed, with what imagery that distinguishes it in Dogon or Buddhist culture from other forms of thinking, philosophizing, etc. To explore how believing is constructed would involve laying out the semantic field in which it is distinguished, to whatever extent it may be distinguished. This is more complicated than simply determining what is believed and the forms believing takes. From the start we could not assume that there was any one way of believing, but if a comparable mode of religiosity existed, there would be a spectrum of distinguished forms or positions. In addition, I should add, it would be central to a practice approach to make sure that believing was not assumed to be a purely internal state, personal understanding of the cosmos, a private relationship that when put into words already succumbed to a relatively alien medium. [That has been the reigning assumption about belief, undergirding any description of modality. In fact, of course, nothing that is assumed to be a purely personal reality is ever actually dealt with as such or even formally studied as such. Think of Freudian theory, its theory of the self and its practice of treating, that in, reaching into, the self.]

Practice theory is also based on the notion of a critical methodology, which first demands that we deconstruct the so-called issue to determine exactly why we are interested in it; in other words, we must uncover the implicit expectations, the assumptions at stake, the crown jewels in the pocket of a particular view of reality,
that is, the value that is endangered if some aspect of our assumed reality proves to be less absolute. Practice theory also demands that the resulting analysis illuminate real applications inadequately by earlier methods. That is, it expects the critical analysis to include an explicit rationale for the usefulness of the rethought term or issue. To analyze modes of believing should not yield the same analysis as ritualizing, or textualizing, to use some topics I have addressed before with practice theory; nor should it yield the same descriptions as 19th century theories of animism, monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, etc. Though I think those analyses paved the way for our approach to believing to leave behind some of the assumptions of the Christian culture is which the study of religion arose.

De Certeau's work is the oldest and clearest practice-like theory around, to date, but provocative resources lie in the ideas of Connerton and Hervieu-Léger on memory (which attempt to shake up our premises and explore other cultural issues that may be involved in believing), and there are also resources in some cognitive theories of the socially adaptive value of agency. I cannot lay out for you today a "practice theory of believing" – much as I wish my work was at that stage. I am confined to a more "gadfly" role for now. I do want to suggest, however, that exploration of believing among Buddhists -- or the Greeks and Romans -- would have to begin as an historical analysis of a non-essentialized lineage of people, groups, stories, rites, and books over varying amounts of time and place. Such a study could arguably isolate some particular cultural strategies at work in the way a
Buddhist or a Greek believed, what I would call a strategic way of acting that enabled a certain type of meshing of constructed expectations, understood cosmology, and reinforcing personal experience – one that would accomplish personalized socio-cultural ends, however political or aesthetic they might be deemed to be, however incomplete in any particular instance. I would suggest that choice, commitment, and rejection is not at all what Christian believing it about; that is what it wants one to think it is doing, not what it is really doing. Probably believing is more likely to be a way in which contradictions are maintained, not truths affirmed.

In the case of Buddhist studies in particular, scholars have been very respectful of the scriptural assumptions, and monastic disclaimers in the face of missionary onslaughts. Even the disproven theories of the strategy behind Chinese popular religious beliefs are far more concrete than anything I have ever read for Buddhism. In effect, we have never really subjected Buddhism to such an analysis of Buddhist believing, even though I have seen Thai Buddhist catechisms, joined Buddhist chants for world peace, and marveled at medieval art depicting the role of the bodhisattva who makes itself available to be entreated by a devotee. Is this believing? I really want to ask you. On one level of course, on another level why should it be, on yet another level, what is going on? What do the Buddhologists say?

Thank you.
To suggest an answer would be to suggest what is distinctive about the modality of believing that the Greeks evinced toward their gods before too much critical analysis had piled up as a cultural option and all the stories were gathered to be revered as myths. Whatever it was earlier and later, it was different from believing among the Romans, whose mythic narrative was standardized earlier on and remained a bit separate from many activities of cultic worship.

The “problem of belief” may be something different in every disciplinary field, given their particular histories of research and research materials. But for the study of religion, the problem of belief is clearly a meaningless dead end. What can we ever say about belief in general? We can talk about beliefs, which are many, all had or held in different ways. Like any discipline, including Shweder’s fault-lined anthropology, we are concerned with the limits of what we know, the differences that we see and imagine, as well as the commonalities that we cannot help but assume. This means that religious studies must focus on the practice of believing, on how people believe, construct believing relationships... Through critical analysis we must leave the Christian baggage behind, which it can do only when we know it, as best we can at this point in history, but committed to continually plumbing the depths. Looking at the practice of believing, relativizing believing, emphasizing the activities rather than a hypothetical mindset, may enable us to do this.

While is it another paper to lay out a full analysis of what it means to focus on the practice of believing, I think the simple change in wording opens the imagination to allow new and different questions. It may not take us as far as we need to go; we may still find ourselves caught, like an oversize fish, in yet another fine netting of cultural assumptions. But for the post-colonial anti-Christian dilemma that Lopez would leave us in, or de Certeau’s romantic having it both ways, or Veyne’s generative classicism of myth to analysis, but all truths – these do not
allow us to go further a field, they beach us on dry land. They confine us to an impossibility, or a Christian ideology defined to seize goods and land; or a naïve mythic truth compared to the critical truth, *all the* gift of the Greeks. Yes, the Greeks became self-conscious about their gods, but so did the Romans while being as bound to them as to the city and their history and their fortunes; but a far traveled people, there was always an odd element of doubt. The special qualities of believing for the Greeks and the Romans -- that is something this seminar will be addressing. I simply hope to have sketched out enough to indicate the main issues behind the well trodden paths and the reasons to look to another route where the adventuresome will find different questions to ask...

Thank you.
1 This talk is drawn from a book manuscript in progress, parts of which have been given as lectures and also published: Bell, History and Theory, Dec 2006 forthcoming; Bell, “The Chinese Believe in Spirits: Belief and Believing in the Study of Religion,” in Nancy K. Frankenberry, ed., Radical Interpretation in Religion (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002) 100-116. No part of this manuscript can be cited or reproduced without the permission of the author.

2 Gauri Viswanathan, Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief (PUP, 1998), pp. xiii-xvii.

3 W. C. Fields

4 David Hume; Donald Davidson, Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984); W. C. Smith, Belief and History (Charlottesville, NC: University of Virginia, 1977); Slavoj Žižek, On Belief (London: Routledge, 2001).


7 Sam Harris, End of Faith (New York: Norton and Co., 2004). The science writer for the New York Times wrote “‘The End of Faith’ articulates the dangers and absurdities of organized religion so fiercely and so fearlessly that I felt relieved as I read it, vindicated, almost personally understood.” Posted on www.samharris.org, but originally published in the NYT.


9 Daniel C. Dennett, Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon (New York: Viking, 2006).

10 There is a rough fairness, however, in the balance of book marketing, when one compares the critical publications of experts or quasi-experts with the enormous popularity of the extensive world of religious publishing. Truly phenomenal sales have been registered by the Christian paperback series, Left Behind, about what happens when “the Rapture” actually occurs and the saved people are suddenly taken, bodily, to Heaven - - taken from the pilot’s seat of an airborne jetliner among other dramatic examples. For all the huffing and puffing about irrational religion, this series has made millions for the authors and widely popularized evangelical teachings about the coming apocalypse. [Left Behind, Tom LeHaye and … ]

11 See Godlove, Terry F., “Saving Belief: On the New Naturalism in Religious Studies” in Frankenberry, ed., Radical Interpretation in Religion, p. 10 (10-24). Although he is arguing from the position that belief is being unfairly belittled in the study of religion, that is, it has problems, Godlove’s essay is a good demonstration of Davidson’s main ideas on belief in regard to some of the debates in the study of religion.


16 Less developed but also interesting arguments for an anthropology of non-universal, fully particular assumptions and categories is also sketched out by Talal Asad, and Jonathan Z. Smith. Asad, Genealogies of

In a more recent and distinctly new current within the field, the anthropologist Matthew Engelke reminds us that the path breaking anthropologists of the twentieth century, E.E. Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner, who both spent years in the field participating in the elaborate ritual life of the Nuer and the Ndembu, respectively, each converted to Catholicism after a few restless years back in the halls of academe. Perhaps after years of close involvement in the highly structured ritual lives of these communities, and then the relative sterility of the rationalized modern technocratic state, Catholicism presented the closest answer to a ritual life with a similarly embracing complexity. (Matthew Engelke, The Problem of Belief: Evans-Pritchard and Victor Turner on ‘the inner life’” Anthropology Today 18, no. 6 [December 2002]: 3-8) Engelke also wonders if the attempt to understand one religion can leave one in a better position to understand another; in this case, Evans-Pritchard’s and Turner’s understanding of the African religions they documented so well might have given them insight and empathy for a religion closer to home. Engelke seems to be innocently raising anew an issue that, in a version only slightly different, marked the birth pains of the degree-granting discipline of the non-theological study of religion, namely, does one have to be a member of a religion to truly understand it. Today it is easily granted that such a scholar would understand Catholicism or Nuer or any other religion. Today it is easily granted that such a scholar would understand the religion differently, indeed, be engaged in answering very different questions than those of concern to practicing members of the religious community. Through the 1960s, however, this issue involved a lengthy and occasionally contentious process of differentiation as the study of religion carved out a place for itself alongside the other disciplines devoted to religion – theology, scripture, and ministerial studies, among others. (See J Z Smith article [in his folder] and in Relating Religion?)


In another depiction of the fault-line, Susan Harding, an anthropologist, has called the intellectual community to account for its demonization of so-called “fundamentalist” Christians (or conservative evangelicals, as they call themselves), which deliberately created the distance that was then bemoaned by social science. According to Harding, she would remain locked out of their worldview and locked in her own prejudices unless she could let down her professional-personal defenses and accept these believers on their own terms. [See Engelke for Harding, also The Book of Jerry Falwell…] Robert Orsi, a scholar of American folk religion, author of several remarkable studies of immigrant Catholicism, facing similar issues, describes negotiating a major ethical challenge encountered when he went to study the famous snake handlers of Tennessee. [Orsi, Heaven and Hell …] Theirs was a whole culture and he was admitted to it, but did taking them on their own terms mean suspending his previous, and still active, ethical norms? The problem of belief has been at the heart of where different cultures meet with each other with interest while clashing in values, where they meet with a sense of shared humanity only to diverge in shock when particular beliefs contest particular beliefs.

Justin Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God?

See Pascal Boyer, for example, …

These paradigms are ....

While some of these theorists are not blind to the dilemmas of social science, and even those of the humanities, they can be unusual “cross-over” figures. Noteworthy is this regard: Scott Atran, In Gods We Trust, and Justin Barrett, Why Would Anyone Believe in God? More challenging, the work of Stephen P. Turner, Brains/Practices/Relativism and Ilkka Pyysätönen, Magic, Miracles and Religion.

Roy A. Rappaport, Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity (Cambridge, 1999): 406-429, 450. Compare Pyysätönen’s comments on phenomenology and his turn to science in Magic, Miracles, and Religion, pp. xiii-xvi, which have a “born-again” style that does not inspire confidence in his objectivity.

But this stance has now fallen by the wayside as questions of origins became irrelevant to the project of interpretation.

See the 2005 second edition as well, ed. Lindsay Jones. J. Z. Smith dates the field to the 1960s, see “Religious Studies: Whither (wither) and Why?” Method and Theory in the Study of Religion 7, no. 4 (1995): 407-414. W. C. Smith has consistently addressed belief (see …). Also the otherwise dated Hastings’
Important exceptions are W. C. Smith, Donald Lopez (to be discussed), and challenges by Donald Wiebe, etc...

29 Needham, Belief, Language and Experience.
30 Needham, Belief, Language and Experience, pp. 32-37, 37.
31 Lopez, “Belief”
32 Lopez, 26-27.
33 Lopez, p. 28.
34 Lopez. We can supplement Lopez’s argument with the well known history that the church inherited, among so much else, the dialectical poles of both Greek rationalism and Hebraic revealed monotheism. Tertullian’s cutting inquiry, “What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?” would be echoed less and less in early Christian history as Greek apologias, such as that of Irenaeus, were joined by the Hebraic view of revelation contained in the creeds, which defined orthodoxy just as they diagnosed heresy. After centuries when Greek culture was more or less lost to Europe, it revived (via Islamic scholarship) bringing back something of the same early debate: for Thomas Aquinas it meant what weight to accord revelation and reason in coming to know God. His answer, which inscribed reason into the heart of the Latin church, was the scholastic theology (and cosmology) lasted in the Roman Catholic Church until the mid-20th century, affirm the power of reason and revelation. But the 16th century, already influenced by the Renaissance, the affirmation of dependence on faith alone, although it ultimately introduced the modern sciences located in study of the book. Yet reason and revelation were both individual apprehensions of the mind and heart; no matter in what the proportion given to each, Christian belief was not an act, not a work, but a state of the mind, with ramifications for the individual soul, not to be fully known by anyone, beyond a confessor, until the Day of Judgment. (unmodified, see notes)

35 Bell, in Frankenberry, ed., Radical Interpretation, pp. 100-116.
36 As an example I cited a famous ethnographic study by Arthur Wolf (“Gods, Ghosts and Ancestors...” See Bell, in Fenn, ed, Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion) that revealed different grades of spirit money were burned as offerings to three grades of spirits--gods, ancestors, and ghosts (my ancestors could be your ghosts, of course)—denoting, he suggested, a cultural organization of the cosmos that specifically mirrored the social landscape and vice versa, a society that mirrored the cosmos. Wolf based his study on Taiwanese rural society, but generally widened the scoped and ramifications of his results. For years his study was widely cited to demonstrate what scholars wanted to assume, namely, the coherence and even structured nature of Chinese folk society. Yet thirty years later, his results appear terribly inflated.
37 Argument developed in Bell Critical Terms, pp. 205-24 or Sociology of Religion, ed. Fenn?
38 Arkush and Lee, eds., The Land Without Ghosts, 1989, 175-81
39 Christine Joost-Gaugier, Measuring Heaven: Pythagoras and His Influence on Thought and Art in Antiquity and the Middle Ages (Ithaca: Cornell, 2006)
40 See the review article by Jeremy Zwelling, entitled “The Fictions of Biblical History,” in History and Theory 39, vol. 1 (February 2000): 117- 141, which begins with Thompson’s The Myth Past: Biblical Archaeology and the Myth of Israel, but goes on to discuss the work of Mieke Bal and Daniel Boyarin among others.
42 Michel de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, trans. Steven Rendall (Bekeley: University of California, 1984), pp. 177-179
43 de Certeau, ibid.
44 It is easy to recognize that people who have never been exposed to any world view but that of their own isolated culture probably do not generally hold the sense of coexistence in the world with their deities that one can find in a worldly savant like Augustine of Hippo, who was aware of many ways of looking at a more or less meaningful universe. Indeed, the first type of society offers its people limited options, nothing more than greater or lesser involvement in the various cultic activities that are not mandated, as initiations or ancestral rites might be. The more cosmopolitan society provides many more and dramatic distinct options, such as those faced by Augustine, who, according to his not totally reliable Confessions, saw two worlds, two cosmologies, fundamentally opposed to each other, demanding that he choose. In fact he had chosen many times, but the demand for a choice never left his purview. He would make a melodramatic choice to believe
something specific, to turn from the cultural tradition of Terence and Virgil, to the biblical Christ of the North African Christianity of his day. His was a choice to engage in a new and specific set of relationships with the divine that brought a set of responsibilities accompanied generated by a very human community to which he was now tied. Mick McCarthy paper.

45 Veyne, chapter

46 Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Chicago, 197…). Eisenstein’s detailed explanation of the rise and ramifications of printing in Europe chronicles its association with the growth of a monastic industry advertising relics. Pilgrimage grew as people read, or heard from those who did, about these marvels and their purported cures, giving rise to the hospices run by the monasteries to house the wayfaring pilgrim and the wealthy cathedrals that grew up at the end off their routes. The relics and the hospices that went with them were important sources of income, not only enabling a monastery to build itself a great cathedral but also to undertake the copying of manuscripts, an activity so important for the life-blood of Christian culture and even the reappearance of Greek. So the printing of simple advertising circulars depicting the relics and miracles to be had at any particular place was among the immediate uses for the new technology. Yet, Eisenstein contains the account of one vexed male pilgrim, complaining, after having gone to visit a seventh reliquary displaying the foreskin of Jesus. Like Pausanias, he was struck by doubt. But rather than grant a kernel of truth, or hope, to any one of them, he seems to have ditched his previous piety to sarcastically question the whole business. Eisenstein’s example describes the circulation of people around Europe and the holy land, the circulation of texts that encouraged them and then described their experiences, presenting them with a variety of competing holy items, even competing notions of holiness. Perhaps not many were as disposed to cynicism as the writer of the complaint about a few too many foreskins; they may simply have refused to select, continuing to put their hope in one relic after another. But surely economic limits and the ability of some displays and stories to exert their influence would make choices inevitable—and some monasteries died while others prospered into major centers. In any case, plural options, or choices, could induce the faithful to accept much in the name of believing or reject it all for more critical stances. The diversity that Greek and Roman culture presented, especially the alternatives presented to Jews or Christians should they travel through Rome or beyond, forced choices on people at every turn. CHECK

47 Christianity itself was never so homogenous that it could represent a unified modality or matrix, without variations in every possible component. The Christian matrix lived within the religion as well, as the Inquisition itself too clearly reminds us. Lopez’s presentation of the role of the Inquisition in defining the nature of belief represents a very historically defined moment in church history and one that sounds like a conceptual prelude to the Reformation. In the early Christian communities, we know that the nature of belief as well as the exact focus of belief were very much up for debate. What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem, asked Tertullian; Origen took up the same question roughly a century later. But a century after Origen, he was a declared heretic as the church came to define more clearly its place in a Greco-Roman empire, even if it fought off all Gnostic rationalizations of the particular divine-human revelation that Jesus Christ was thought to represent. The matrix is assembled slowly, and as it did, more corners and centers of Christendom experienced fewer choices or conversions, the rejections mere pro forma condemnations of distant heretics and pagans.


49 Bell in Frankenberry, ed., *Radical Interpretation*. 
Prayer & Notes

Thesis --

Religion, Belief and Prayer are, for analytical purposes, three distinct entities – so some sort!

Analytic Move –

Breaking the automatic connection with religion allows fresh perspectives, particularly in view of the bind ‘religion’ is in when approached/defined ‘scientifically’. This is not to diss such efforts. But they do not allow us to unwrap religion, which is taken as a given, definitely a sociological, historical, psychological “thing” out there.

Historical Move –

There is a long history of sciences of man, sciences of religion, sciences of the social, etc, which have brought me and my various colleagues here today of course as a discourse community. These sciences revise and redo each other, but that is the nature of research, analysis, testing – and both our institutions of learning and the short-term historical memory of disciplines with increasing numbers of trunks of such written endeavors in our attics. And in an age of inter-disciplinary discussion, represented by the bestseller at least (the book that everyone is reading, must be read), a very welcome development in ages of specialization, we feel free to dip in and out of other fields without getting too bogged down by their historical luggage. I do it, you do it; we should be called on it at times.

Are Vico and Tyler so forgotten? Yes and no. We don’t build in American culture, we recreate, which requires razing the ground with dim remembering of any of its historical features, rarely acknowledging historical orientations that have delivered us to this moment. We ‘remember’ when we have other purposes.

Personal Identifications –

Sciences and cognitive theory are not my main resources/opponents/contexts, etc. for reasoning about religion and religion issues.

I use the evolving history of our thinking about religion – from the pre Christian elements of theology to the postmodern critiques of any such category as religion (or belief, etc)
In addition to this diachronic axis, I also use the more synchronic resources of modern (18-21st century) anthropology. (Sociology and psychology less thoroughly?) Added to a specialization in Chinese culture and history, this latter set of resources enables me to distance myself to some extent from aspects of debates revolving around English terms, Christian categories, and even the customs of the Euro-American academy. I am not unique in this background, nor more privileged (?) than that brought by others.

Verstehen and eklaren were basic to my education – with all the debates on the side of how to best verstehen, and the ramifications of the projects so envisioned. Postmodernism was not really challenging the full deck of cards here, due to its own sympathies toward verstehen.

Challenges –

Cognitive theory’s new universalism
Anthropology’s/area studies’ particularism
The persistent, because useful, divide between the social and the personal
Notes from Tomoko conversation about *Genealogies of the Study of Religion*
1-734-332-0164 Home

A genealogy of a subfield that is part of a larger effort to explain the field to outsiders (need seen in conversations with the Social Science Research Council) and perhaps to be the first product of a Mellon-sponsored conference on setting up rel depts. at UMichigan, UC Berkeley and JohnsHopkins, only major research universities without them (just programs at best). Outsiders do not understand about ‘divinity’ school programs, academic thrust of subfields like Biblical studies, or the major issues that drive the field in all its formations.

Not a survey of literature, not a history of major figures. More angled to explain the scholarship, what does the area stand for, what type of scholarship does it produce, how to understand the field. Issue-oriented. A book for orienting outsiders (unlike *Critical Terms* which addressed insiders somewhat provocatively).

My assignment: something about cognition, but not to be limited to cognitive theory as that has been recently defined. Not psychology of religion either. But because of my belief work, and my ‘deft’ handling of cognitive theory in my UChicago alum of the year talk.

Cognition and Performance: Study of the Religious Imagination
Cognition and Action in Studying the Religious Imagination
Cognitive States and Performative Activities
Questions of Cognition and Belief
Cognition and Belief
Cognitive Questions on Religious Dispositions
Cognition

NEED TO KNOW WHAT PHIL OF REL (M C TAYLOR) IS GOING TO COVER

She did not ask for anything on ritual and performance. Someone doing Anthropology of Religion; two on theology (i.e., Greely and David Tracey on catholic imagination; Veyne on historical/cultural imaginations; even IZS’s *Imagining Religions: Babylon to Jonestown* [what does into say about imagining, who does it, scholar or native?] ); one on the Philosophy of Religion (which covers belief, hopefully religious language...); but no one the creation of art and no ‘sociology’ tho the highlights would be in anthropology.
--Marx? Feuerbach?
--Otto?
--Wm James
--Freud and Jung?
--Adaptive mechanism (Burkert; Boyer; ); softer Atran, Barrett, Andresen
--Rappaport (developing Durkheim, and more..)
--Belief': Wittgenstein, more philos, to Veyne more histo-cultural
--Geertz - cultural ideology, moods & motivations (cognition is the personal realm?)
--R. Needham
--Mysticism? Transcendence? (Underhill; lots of phil of rel on this; also Eliade) vs rationalism??
--Faith and Knowledge = phil of rel (justification as in Audi and Basil Mitchell [Klemke text 618
--Experience (W Proudfoot; Bob Sharf; Taves in ERel’05; also Wach Types of Religious Experience '51 and Max Weber’s Sociology of Religion)
--Prayer?
--The sacred?
--Ritual as example of cog turn, via the attentions of Lawson and McCauley
--Why people believe outrageous things.... (Kaiminer, Shermer)

All these, but the study of religion – while ready to see religion in psycho-social-cultural terms – is not ready to reduce it to economics, frontal lobe anamolies, evolutionary adaptive mechanisms, but it is ready to see all these as part of the picture. Not religion as ‘sui generic,’ a position that was staked out by Eliade but not strongly picked up by the major figures or developments in the field, but a conflagration of forces and mechanisms, which could make it increasingly less relevant for large portions of society or, conversely, still playing a vital if historically different role in various cultural contexts.
Book Proposal

*Genealogies of the Study of Religion*

Edited by Tomoko Masuzawa

Preface: Craig Calhoun (for example?)

Introduction: Tomoko Masuzawa
[includes discussions of (1) idiosyncratic and often multiple usages of terms, e.g., "history of religion(s)," "theological," etc.; (2) prevalence of subfields "religion and ..." (dialogic fields and cognate fields); (3) relation—overlap, tension—among the subfields; (4) institutional backdrop to the relation between scholarly and confessional interests/activities]

   [fold in "Religion and ..." / dialogic fields]

2. Biblical Studies Ward Blanton

3. History of Christianity Elizabeth Clark
   [Christian origins, Patristics, church history]

4. Historical Theology (?) Jonathan Sheehan
   [medieval to early modern history of Christian thought]

5. Systematic Theology Hent de Vries
   [modern & contemporary philosophical theology]

6. Philosophy of Religion Mark C. Taylor

7. History of Religions Donald S. Lopez
   [non-western and/or non-Biblical religions]

8. Anthropology of Religion Gillian Feeley-Harnik*

9. Cognitive Theory (?) Catherine Bell
   [fold in / touch on psychology of religion]

10. Religion and Society (?) Winnifred Fallers Sullivan*
    [emphasis on legal studies]

11. Theory and Method Tomoko Masuzawa
(*pending confirmation)